The Fantasy Worlds of Peter Beagle

Lila the Werewolf, The Last Unicorn, Come, Lady Death, and *A Fine and Private Place* complete in one volume

by Peter Beagle

A girl named Lila who lives on New York's Upper West Side, goes to her analyst three afternoons a week, plays the guitar—and just happens to be a werewolf . . .

The last unicorn on earth, who does not look "anything like a horned horse, as unicorns are often pictured, being smaller and cloven-hoofed, and possessing the oldest, wildest grace that horses have never had" . . .

Flora, Lady Neville, the wisest and wittiest woman in eighteenth-century London, who sends an invitation for one of her glittering parties to Death—and is accepted . . .

Two young people, Michael and Laura, whose growing romance—abetted by an old recluse and a raven who talks like a Damon Runyon character—is complicated by the fact that both of them are ghosts . . .

These are some of the characters who inhabit the fantasy worlds of Peter Beagle, and who have cast their strange and marvelous spell over hundreds of thousands of readers since Beagle's first novel, *A Fine and Private Place*, was published in 1960. With that book, audiences and critics alike discovered a startlingly original writer who describes talking ravens and disappearing cats and harpies and eighteenth-century dandies and werewolves as if they were creatures that might happen to anybody. As he himself points out, "it's no less absurd and presumptuous to try on the skin of a bank teller than that of a Bigfoot or a dragon"—and this magical sense of proportion touches each of the tales in this "unicornucopia"[1] of a book:

There is *Lila the Werewolf*, a novella published in book form here for the first time, which tells the story of Joe Farrell and his girlfriend Lila Braun, who turns into a wolf at the full moon —a wolf with "pale green eyes, the color of the

(Continued on back flap)

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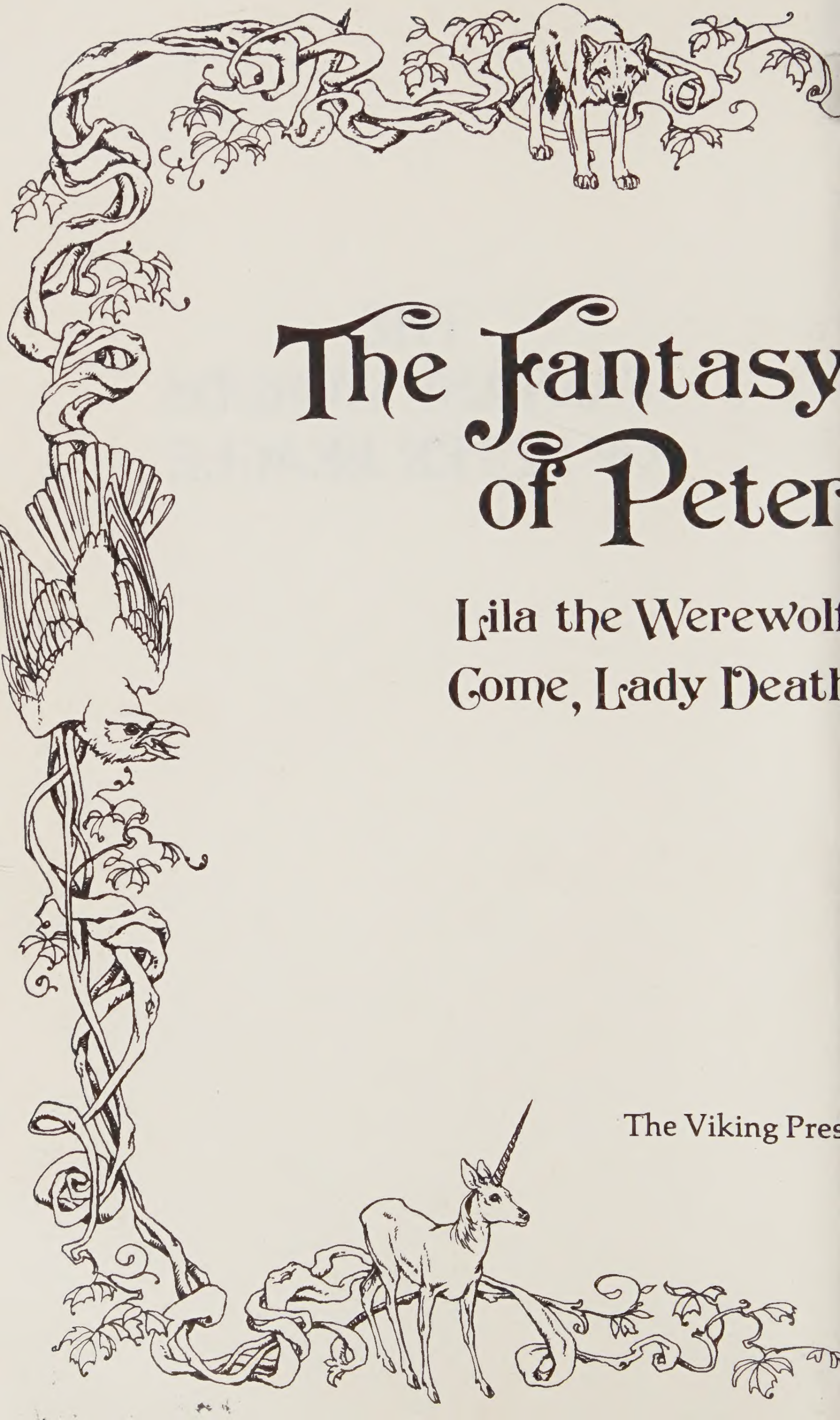

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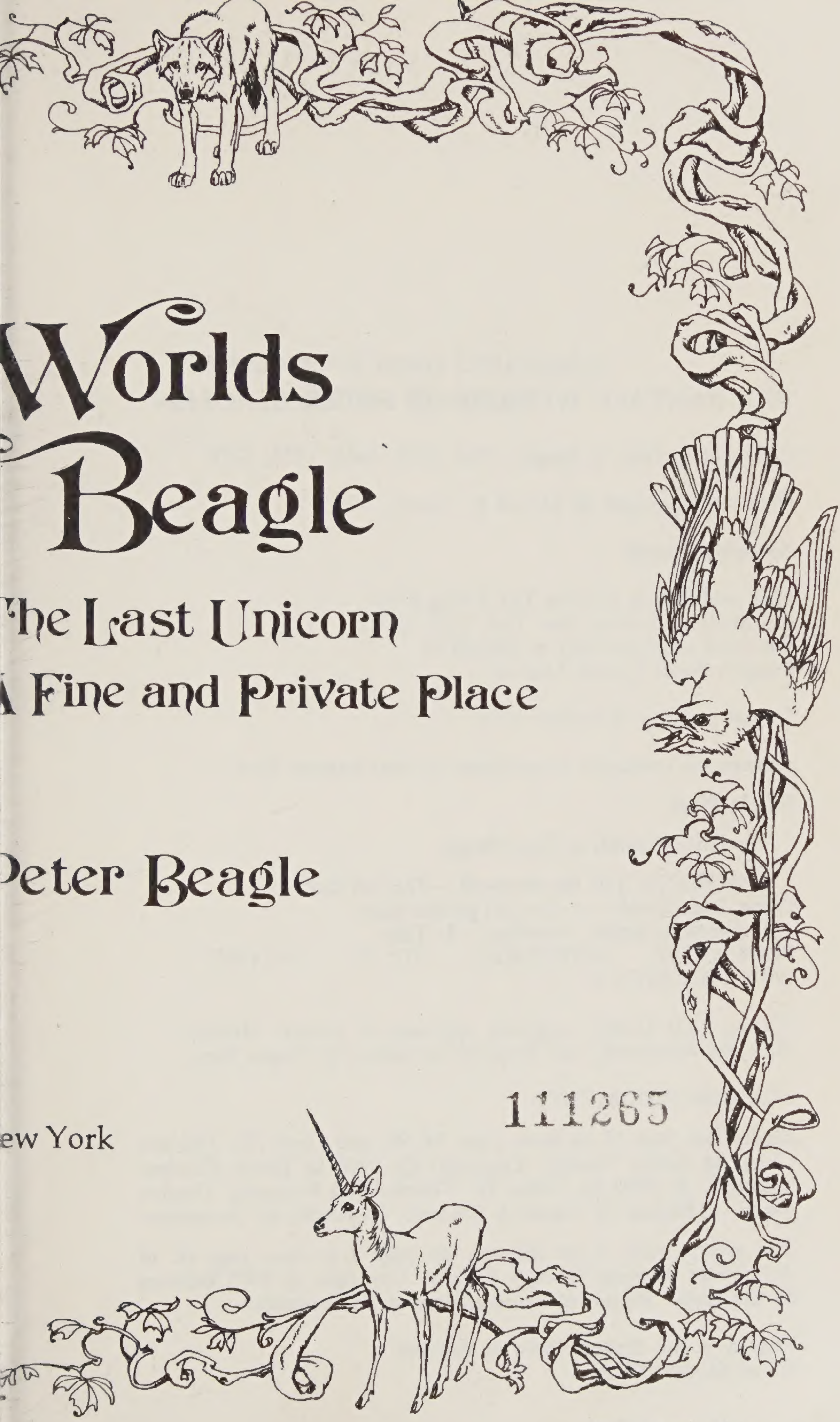

Worlds
Beagle

The Last Unicorn
A Fine and Private Place

Peter Beagle

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In memory of Louis Untermeyer
and Edgar Pangborn

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The Self-Made Werewolf

> *"Quand je veux créer, je cherche en moi des choses qui semblaient ne pas être en moi et elles sortent de moi!"*
>
> GEORGES BRASSENS

IT SEEMS TO ME that there are only two important things to know about my fiction. In the first place, as a born hider, I have been fascinated all my life by disguise, camouflage, shape-changers, and by everything that has to be approached backwards or sideways, while one pretends to be thinking of something else. There are fish and crustaceans in the sea who survive only by passing themselves off as stones, or bits of seaweed, or as dangerous gangster types. For my own part, I tend to cultivate an air of guileless candor. It comes to precisely the same thing.

In the second place, I have always been a singer. I write songs occasionally; and I'm immensely vain of the fact that for five years now I've been performing the works of the great French *chansonniers* (Brassens, Jacques Brel, Léo Ferré, Charles Aznavour) every Saturday night in a tiny restaurant in Santa Cruz. But what matters is that I sing all the time, usually only half-aware that I'm doing it: a perpetual murmurous jumble of opera and blues, old show tunes and Southern hymns, Elizabethan ballads of murder and revenge, Hasidic minor-key celebrations, and Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs. Often there are no intelligible words at all—it becomes something closer to breathing, or blood circulation, or purring. It goes on in me all the time, one way and another.

Both of these details may go some little way toward explaining why I like to write fantasy. As much as I've ever explained it to myself (being intellectually lazy, and consequently a kind of National Park for underdone thoughts), the fantastic turn of vision suits both my sense of the world as a profoundly strange and deceptive place, and my deepest sense of poetry, which is singing. It also gives me the richest possible forest of lives and happenings to move in, busy and shadowed, at home in the shadows of time. At any rate, I am advised that I start talking like that after the second San Miguel.

After the third, I am likely to announce that all writing is fantasy anyway: that to set any event down in print is immediately to begin to lie about it, thank goodness; and that it's no less absurd and presumptuous to try on the skin of a bank teller than that of a Bigfoot or a dragon. But the truth seems to be that I just see like that, and sing like that, and always have.

The most important single influence on my work is neither James Stephens, or T. H. White, nor even Brassens, but animals. For me to look back at my childhood is to see—very far away, and flinchingly, tenderly near—a fat, asthmatic, lonely Bronx kid who read every book he could find on wolves and cougars and wild horses; who played at *being* a wolf, instead of Roy Rogers or Captain Video (in the bath, he used to be one of Mowgli's wolves swimming the Waingunga); whose imaginary friend, as late as high school, was a black-maned lion; and who couldn't breathe if he was around a house cat for half an hour. (For that matter, I invariably had asthma attacks in the cold, dusty Cloisters, but I always insisted on being taken there to see the Unicorn Tapestries.) There's no book or story of mine that isn't stiff with animal imagery—animal feeling—whether the protagonists are unicorns, werewolves and ravens, or only noblemen and motorscooters. It's no coincidence that the book I remember as having been the purest joy in the making is my collaboration with Pat Derby, *The Lady and Her Tiger*. I live with a lot of animals now, and I know two wolves named Lucy and Sylvester.

A Fine And Private Place is my state-of-grace book. I was nineteen when I began writing it in the evenings at the University of Pittsburgh, while my roommate's six-member fraternity held its meetings around his bed, and the Pittsburgh Pirates lost ballgames across the street. The cemetery is a very real place (I grew up playing there, going for walks, or sitting at the kitchen window with my brother, peacefully watching funeral processions winding over the green-and-white slopes); and most of the incidental physical details are drawn from that far northern tip of the Bronx where the subways end. Mr. Rebeck is a flagrant steal from the Robert Nathan novels that I was devouring at the time, most particularly *One More Spring*. Michael Morgan was my idea of what being all of thirty-four and unhappily but interestingly married would be like; Laura Durand is me then; and Mrs. Gertrude Klapper, thank God, is herself. I'm very proud of Mrs. Klapper, even now.

When I speak of a state of grace, I mean simply that whatever takes care of fools, drunks, and nineteen-year-old novelists looked after me while I was writing *A Fine And Private Place.* I will never again make mistakes as innocently egregious as those I made in that book, nor know as much as I did then, nor be so terribly concerned to get it all down at once. Nor will I ever be nineteen again, typing in Pittsburgh at two in the morning, with the letters printing as dimly as stencils on the page because I was trying not to wake anyone. I felt very important, and full of secrets, and I couldn't sleep for hugging myself and smiling. Today I can't judge the book at all, but I remember that time with thankfulness.

"Come Lady Death" is my Isak Dinesen story. I wrote it in a day and a half at Stanford in 1961, mostly to see whether I could sneak it past Frank O'Connor, who hated all fantasy categorically. He gave it a magnificent reading, in his best Abbey Theatre voice, and then announced to the writing class, "This is a beautifully written story. I don't like it." I promptly lost my one copy—it was shaken out of a pillowcase over a year later. Since then, "Lady Death" has followed me around like The Cat Who Came Back, turning up in magazines, anthologies, the O. Henry Award collection, on BBC television, and even in Finnish and Serbo-Croatian translations. Some day I'll turn her into a song.

"Lila the Werewolf" has a similar history in some respects. I wrote it around 1967—also very quickly—with no other purpose than to tell myself a story. No magazine would take it, and I ended up giving *Lila* away to a U.C. Santa Cruz student magazine. Then Noel Young published it as a chapbook in his excellent Capra Press series, and one odd anthology after another began to reprint it, culminating—or climaxing—with *Oui*. It even looks, at this writing, as if there may be a film version one day soon.

But "Lila" worries people. It worried one critic enough to inquire publicly—and with genuine concern—about my mental health; and it's come to disquiet me a bit too in the last few years. As far as I know, I was just spinning a tale, as always, and the equating of womanhood with lycanthropy, or sexual needs with blood and death, was entirely dictated by the story and the characters. But I wonder now, and I never used to.

I like my script of "Lila" better than the story, in several ways. The ending is considerably less violent, for one thing; for another, the focus is on Lila, rather than on Farrell, and her mother is something less of a caricature. It's meant to be a love story now. All the same, it continues to make me a bit nervous these days, and I don't know what I think of it anymore. But it's mine too.

The songs were written because I don't write many stories or poems, and because I can't make anything with my hands except music. I have an old envy of carpenters, cabinetmakers, weavers, sewers, silversmiths—of anyone who is able to make something whole and tangible and unique to give to someone else. The songs, and the singing of them, fill that need.

The Last Unicorn is the book that people know who don't know anything else I've written; it will probably haunt the rest of my career, as *The Crock of Gold* came to haunt James Stephens. With the passing of time, it has become a sort of personal *I Ching*, which gives me no advice, no handy warnings, but slowly tells me things I had forgotten, or hidden from myself. Schmendrick the Magician comes out of bedtime stories that I used to tell my oldest daughter. The little cat's name was Zöe; she died last year, very old. The butterfly is a self-portrait, and so—villain of the story though he may be—is King Haggard, with his dreadful hunger for a beauty that can never escape him, and his crippling knowledge that nothing is worth loving because everything dies in his hands. I grow increasingly shy of talking about *The Last Unicorn*, except in the most specific and limited way.

I have been working on a third novel for what seems like half my life—it has to do with a society of homemade medievalists who like to reenact the Middle Ages on weekends. My dear coward Farrell is in it, some years older than in "Lila the Werewolf," but no less peccable and souciant. The book doesn't have a title yet, but a chapter has been published in an Anchor paperback anthology called *Phantasmagoria*, edited by Jane Mobley.

At present, there are four or five other novels lined up inside me, shuffling their feet, waiting their turn. There's the one about the traveling actors in the Midwest of the 1870s; there's the huge, picaresque thing telling the adventures of a Spanish spy in Elizabethan London; the small story about people grinding out horror movies—you notice, of course, that they all have to do with actors, with shape-shifting and masquerading. I doubt very much that I'll ever write a proper spy novel, but in a way most of my people are spies, or feel that they are: not government secret agents, but spies without homes, without memories, spies abandoned here with no instructions except to survive, to wing it and look human. Some of us even manage to become human in the process.

And I think that's all, except to add that none of the above is to be trusted. I am an old professional liar squatting in the bazaar, and my stories are born out of a dubious stew of greed, love, pride, fear, loneliness, low cunning, and the sheer sensual pleasure of lying well. If I identify myself with any literary creation, it's probably James Thurber's Golux, the dubious little creature in *The Thirteen Clocks,* who warns the prince who wants to place his faith in him:

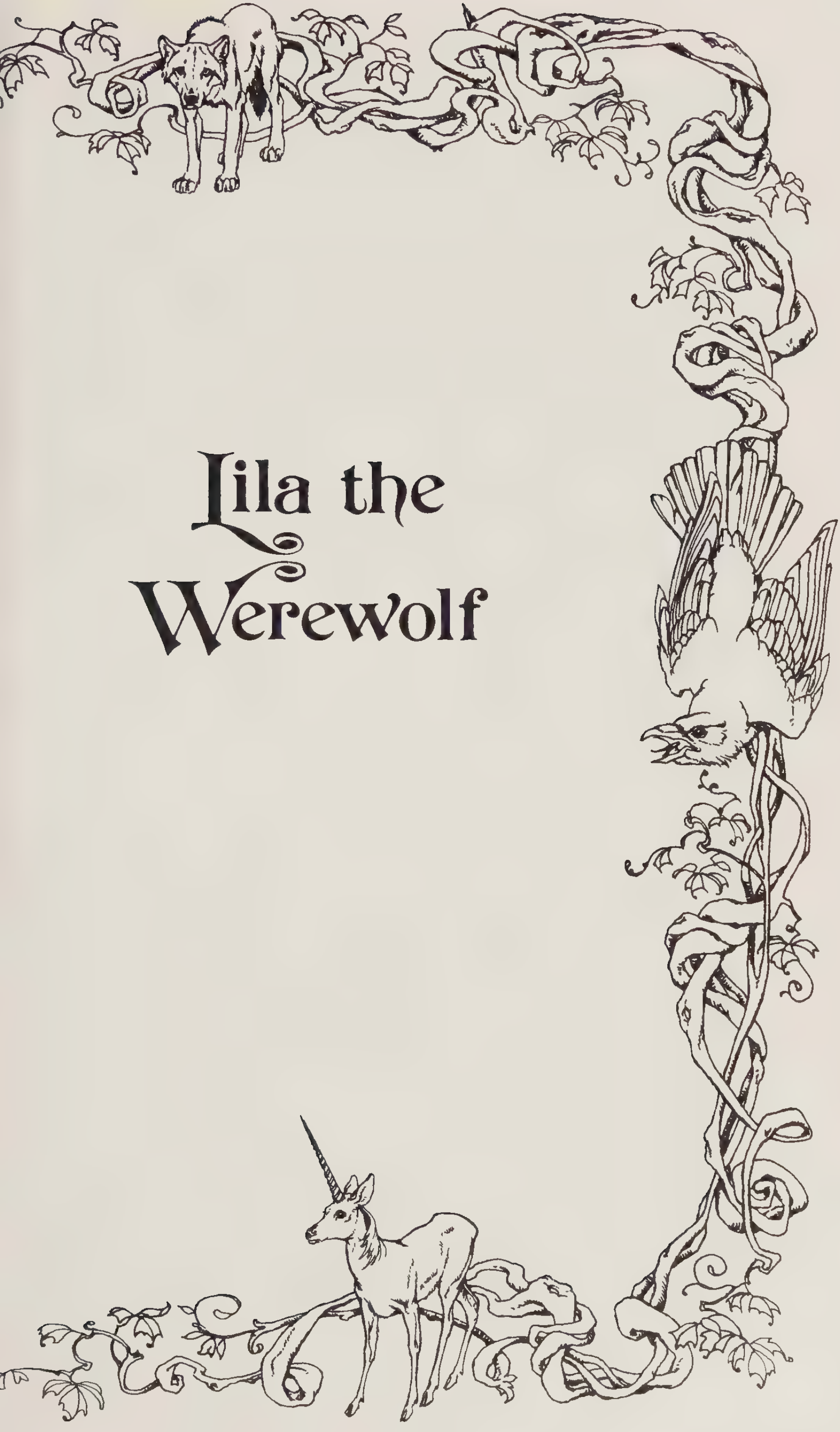
> Not so fast. Half the places I have been to, never were. I make things up. Half the things I say are there cannot be found. . . . I make mistakes, but I am on the side of Good, by accident and happenchance. . . .

Late in that book, as the wicked schemes of the cold Duke of Coffin Castle begin to crumble around him, the Duke and his henchman Hark look on in terror as

> . . . something very much like nothing anyone had seen before came trotting down the stairs and crossed the room.
>
> "What is that?" the Duke asked, palely.
>
> "I don't know what it is," said Hark, "but it's the only one there ever was."

Much of the time I think that I'd be quite happy to have that last line as a coat of arms, or an epitaph. Of course, that's not a reliable statement either. I make things up.

Peter S. Beagle
Watsonville, California
1 June 1978



Lila the Werewolf

LILA BRAUN had been living with Farrell for three weeks before he found out she was a werewolf. They had met at a party when the moon was a few nights past the full, and by the time it had withered to the shape of a lemon Lila had moved her suitcase, her guitar, and her Ewan MacColl records two blocks north and four blocks west to Farrell's apartment on Ninety-Eighth Street. Girls sometimes happened to Farrell like that.

One evening Lila wasn't in when Farrell came home from work at the bookstore. She had left a note on the table, under a can of tunafish. The note said that she had gone up to the Bronx to have dinner with her mother, and would probably be spending the night there. The cole slaw in the refrigerator should be finished up before it went bad.

Farrell ate the tunafish and gave the cole slaw to Grunewald. Grunewald was a half-grown Russian wolfhound, the color of sour milk. He looked like a goat, and had no outside interests except shoes. Farrell was taking care of him for a girl who was away in Europe for the summer. She sent Grunewald a tape recording of her voice every week.

Farrell went to a movie with a friend, and to the West End afterward for beer. Then he walked home alone under the full moon, which was red and yellow. He reheated the morning coffee, played a record, read through a week-old "News of the Week in Review" section of the Sunday *Times*, and finally took Grunewald up to the roof for the night, as he always did. The dog had been accustomed to sleep in the same bed with his mistress, and the point was not negotiable. Grunewald mooed and scrabbled and butted all the way, but Farrell pushed him out among the looming chimneys and ventilators and slammed the door. Then he came back downstairs and went to bed.

He slept very badly. Grunewald's baying woke him twice; and there was something else that brought him half out of bed, thirsty and lonely, with his sinuses full and the night swaying like a curtain as the figures of his dream scurried offstage. Grunewald seemed to have gone off the air—perhaps it was the silence that had awakened him. Whatever the reason, he never really got back to sleep.

He was lying on his back, watching a chair with his clothes on it becoming a chair again, when the wolf came in through the open window. It landed lightly in the middle of the room and stood there for a moment, breathing quickly, with its ears back. There was blood on the wolf's teeth and tongue, and blood on its chest.

Farrell, whose true gift was for acceptance, especially in the morning, accepted the idea that there was a wolf in his bedroom and lay quite still, closing his eyes as the grim, black-lipped head swung toward him. Having once worked at a zoo, he was able to recognize the beast as a Central European subspecies: smaller and lighter-boned than the northern timber wolf variety, lacking the thick, ruffy mane at the shoulders and having a more pointed nose and ears. His own pedantry always delighted him, even at the worst moments.

Blunt claws clicking on the linoleum, then silent on the throw rug by the bed. Something warm and slow splashed down on his shoulder, but he never moved. The wild smell of the wolf was over him, and that did frighten him at last—to be in the same room with that smell and the Miró prints on the walls. Then he felt the sunlight on his eyelids, and at the same moment he heard the wolf moan softly and deeply. The sound was not repeated, but the breath on his face was suddenly sweet and smoky, dizzyingly familiar after the other. He opened his eyes and saw Lila. She was sitting naked on the edge of the bed, smiling, with her hair down.

"Hello, baby," she said. "Move over, baby. I came home."

Farrell's gift was for acceptance. He was perfectly willing to believe that he had dreamed the wolf; to believe Lila's story of boiled chicken and bitter arguments and sleeplessness on Tremont Avenue; and to forget that her first caress had been to bite him on the shoulder, hard enough so that the blood crusting there as he got up and made breakfast might very well be his own. But then he left the coffee perking and went up to the roof to get Grunewald. He found the dog sprawled in a grove of TV antennas, looking more like a goat than ever, with his throat torn out. Farrell had never actually seen an animal with its throat torn out.

The coffeepot was still chuckling when he came back into the apartment, which struck him as very odd. You could have either werewolves or Pyrex nine-cup percolators in the world, but not both, surely. He told Lila, watching her face. She was a small girl, not really pretty, but with good eyes and a lovely mouth, and with a curious sullen gracefulness that had been the first thing to speak to Farrell at the party. When he told her how Grunewald had looked, she shivered all over, once.

"Ugh!" she said, wrinkling her lips back from her neat white teeth. "Oh baby, how awful. Poor Grunewald. Oh, poor Barbara." Barbara was Grunewald's owner.

"Yeah," Farrell said. "Poor Barbara, making her little tapes in Saint-Tropez." He could not look away from Lila's face.

She said, "Wild dogs. Not really wild, I mean, but with owners. You hear about it sometimes, how a pack of them get together and attack children and things, running through the streets. Then they go home and eat their Dog Yummies. The scary thing is that they probably live right around here. Everybody on the block seems to have a dog. God, that's scary. Poor Grunewald."

"They didn't tear him up much," Farrell said. "It must have been just for the fun of it. And the blood. I didn't know dogs killed for the blood. He didn't have any blood left."

The tip of Lila's tongue appeared between her lips, in the unknowing reflex of a fondled cat. As evidence, it wouldn't have stood up even in old Salem; but Farrell knew the truth then, beyond laziness or rationalization, and went on buttering toast for Lila. Farrell had nothing against werewolves, and he had never liked Grunewald.

He told his friend Ben Kassoy about Lila when they met in the Automat for lunch. He had to shout it over the clicking and rattling all around them, but the people sitting six inches away on either hand never looked up. New Yorkers never eavesdrop. They hear only what they simply cannot help hearing.

Ben said, "I told you about Bronx girls. You better come stay at my place for a few days."

Farrell shook his head. "No, that's silly. I mean, it's only Lila. If she were going to hurt me, she could have done it last night. Besides, it won't happen again for a month. There has to be a full moon."

His friend stared at him. "So what? What's that got to do with anything? You going to go on home as though nothing had happened?"

"Not as though nothing had happened," Farrell said lamely. "The thing is, it's still only Lila, not Lon Chaney or somebody. Look, she goes to her psychiatrist three afternoons a week, and she's got her guitar lesson one night a week, and her pottery class one night, and she cooks eggplant maybe twice a week. She calls her mother every Friday night, and one night a month she turns into a wolf. You see what I'm getting at? It's still Lila, whatever she does, and I just can't get terribly shook about it. A little bit, sure, because what the hell. But I don't know. Anyway, there's no mad rush about it. I'll talk to her when the thing comes up in the conversation, just naturally. It's okay."

Ben said, "God damn. You see why nobody has any respect for liberals anymore? Farrell, I know you. You're just scared of hurting her feelings."

"Well, it's that too," Farrell agreed, a little embarrassed. "I hate confrontations. If I break up with her now, she'll think I'm doing it because she's a werewolf. It's awkward, it feels nasty and middle-class. I should have broken up with her the first time I met her mother, or the second time she served the eggplant. Her mother, boy, there's the real werewolf, there's somebody I'd wear wolfbane against, that woman. Damn, I wish I hadn't found out. I don't think I've ever found out anything about people that I was the better for knowing."

Ben walked all the way back to the bookstore with him, arguing. It touched Farrell, because Ben hated to walk. Before they parted, Ben suggested, "At least you could try some of that stuff you were talking about, the wolfbane. There's garlic, too—you put some in a little bag and wear it around your neck. Don't laugh, man. If there's such a thing as werewolves, the other stuff must be real too. Cold iron, silver, oak, running water—"

"I'm not laughing at you," Farrell said, but he was still grinning. "Lila's shrink says she has a rejection thing, very deep-seated, take us years to break through all that scar tissue. Now if I start walking around wearing amulets and mumbling in Latin every time she looks at me, who knows how far it'll set her back? Listen, I've done some things I'm not proud of, but I don't want to mess up anyone's analysis. That's the sin against God." He sighed and slapped Ben lightly on the arm. "Don't worry about it. We'll work it out, I'll talk to her."

But between that night and the next full moon, he found no good, casual way of bringing the subject up. Admittedly, he did not try as hard as he might have: it was true that he feared confrontations more than he feared werewolves, and he would have found it almost as difficult to talk to Lila about her guitar playing, or her pots, or the political arguments she got into at parties. "The thing is," he said to Ben, "it's sort of one more little weakness not to take advantage of. In a way."

They made love often that month. The smell of Lila flowered

Golden Sierra
High School Library

in the bedroom, where the smell of the wolf still lingered almost visibly, and both of them were wild, heavy zoo smells, warm and raw and fearful, the sweeter for being savage. Farrell held Lila in his arms and knew what she was, and he was always frightened; but he would not have let her go if she had turned into a wolf again as he held her. It was a relief to peer at her while she slept and see how stubby and childish her fingernails were, or that the skin around her mouth was rashy because she had been snacking on chocolate. She loved secret sweets, but they always betrayed her.

It's only Lila after all, he would think as he drowsed off. Her mother used to hide the candy, but Lila always found it. Now she's a big girl, neither married nor in a graduate school, but living in sin with an Irish musician, and she can have all the candy she wants. What kind of a werewolf is that. Poor Lila, practicing *Who killed Davey Moore? Why did he die?* . . .

The note said that she would be working late at the magazine, on layout, and might have to be there all night. Farrell put on about four feet of Telemann laced with Django Reinhardt, took down *The Golden Bough*, and settled into a chair by the window. The moon shone in at him, bright and thin and sharp as the lid of a tin can, and it did not seem to move at all as he dozed and woke.

Lila's mother called several times during the night, which was interesting. Lila still picked up her mail and most messages at her old apartment, and her two roommates covered for her when necessary, but Farrell was absolutely certain that her mother knew she was living with him. Farrell was an expert on mothers. Mrs. Braun called him Joe each time she called and that made him wonder, for he knew she hated him. Does she suspect that we share a secret? Ah, poor Lila.

The last time the telephone woke him, it was still dark in the room, but the traffic lights no longer glittered through rings of mist, and the cars made a different sound on the warming pavement. A man was saying clearly in the street, "Well, *I'd* shoot'm. *I'd* shoot'm." Farrell let the telephone ring ten times before he picked it up.

"Let me talk to Lila," Mrs. Braun said.

"She isn't here." What if the sun catches her, what if she turns back to herself in front of a cop, or a bus driver, or a couple of nuns going to early Mass? "Lila isn't here, Mrs. Braun."

"I have reason to believe that's not true." The fretful, muscular voice had dropped all pretense of warmth. "I want to talk to Lila."

Farrell was suddenly dry-mouthed and shivering with fury. It was her choice of words that did it. "Well, I have reason to believe you're a suffocating old bitch and a bourgeois Stalinist. How do you like them apples, Mrs. B?" As though his anger had summoned her, the wolf was standing two feet away from him. Her coat was dark and lank with sweat, and yellow saliva was mixed with the blood that strung from her jaws. She looked at Farrell and growled far away in her throat.

"Just a minute," he said. He covered the receiver with his palm. "It's for you," he said to the wolf. "It's your mother."

The wolf made a pitiful sound, almost inaudible, and scuffed at the floor. She was plainly exhausted. Mrs. Braun pinged in Farrell's ear like a bug against a lighted window. "What, what? Hello, what is this? Listen, you put Lila on the phone right now. Hello? I want to talk to Lila. I know she's there."

Farrell hung up just as the sun touched a corner of the window. The wolf became Lila. As before, she only made one sound. The phone rang again, and she picked it up without a glance at Farrell. "Bernice?" Lila always called her mother by her first name. "Yes—no, no—yeah, I'm fine. I'm all right, I just forgot to call. No, I'm all right, will you listen? Bernice, there's no law that says you have to get hysterical. Yes, you are." She dropped down on the bed, groping under her pillow for cigarettes. Farrell got up and began to make coffee.

"Well, there was a little trouble," Lila was saying. "See, I went to the Zoo, because I couldn't find—Bernice, I know, I *know*, but that was, what, three months ago. The thing is, I didn't think they'd have their horns so soon. Bernice, I had to, that's all. There'd only been a couple of cats and a —well, sure they chased me, but I—well, Momma, Bernice, what did you want me to do? Just what did you want me to do? You're always so dramatic—why do I shout? I shout because I can't get you to listen to me any other way. You remember what Dr. Schechtman said—what? No, I told you, I just forgot to call. No, that is the reason, that's the real and only reason. Well, whose fault is that? What? Oh, Bernice. Jesus Christ, Bernice. All right, *how* is it Dad's fault?"

She didn't want the coffee, or any breakfast but she sat at the table in his bathrobe and drank milk greedily. It was the first time he had ever seen her drink milk. Her face was sandy-pale, and her eyes were red. Talking to her mother left her looking as though she had actually gone ten rounds with the woman. Farrell asked, "How long has it been happening?"

"Nine years," Lila said. "Since I hit puberty. First day, cramps; the second day, this. My introduction to womanhood." She snickered and spilled her milk. "I want some more," she said. "Got to get rid of that taste."

"Who knows about it?" he asked. "Pat and Janet?" They were the two girls she had been rooming with.

"God, no. I'd never tell them. I've never told a girl. Bernice knows, of course, and Dr. Schechtman—he's my head doctor. And you now. That's all." Farrell waited. She was a bad liar, and only did it to heighten the effect of the truth. "Well, there was Mickey," she said. "The guy I told you about the first night, you remember? It doesn't matter. He's an acidhead in Vancouver, of all the places. He'll never tell anybody."

He thought: I wonder if any girl has ever talked about me in that sort of voice. I doubt it, offhand. Lila said, "It wasn't too hard to keep it secret. I missed a lot of things. Like I never could go to the riding camp, and I still want to. And the senior play, when I was in high school. They picked me to play the girl in *Liliom*, but then they changed the evening, and I had to say I was sick. And the winter's bad, because the sun sets so early. But actually, it's been a lot less trouble than my goddamn allergies." She made a laugh, but Farrell did not respond.

"Dr. Schectman says it's a sex thing," she offered. "He says it'll take years and years to cure it. Bernice thinks I should go to someone else, but I don't want to be one of those women who runs around changing shrinks like hair colors. Pat went through five of them in a month one time. Joe, I wish you'd say something. Or just go away."

"Is it only dogs?" he asked. Lila's face did not change, but her chair rattled, and the milk went over again. Farrell said, "Answer me. Do you only kill dogs, and cats, and zoo animals?"

The tears began to come, heavy and slow, bright as knives in the morning sunlight. She could not look at him; and when she tried to speak she could only make creaking, cartilaginous sounds in her throat. "*You* don't know," she whispered at last. "You don't have any idea what it's like."

"That's true," he answered. He always was very fair about that particular point.

He took her hand, and then she really began to cry. Her sobs were horrible to hear, much more frightening to Farrell than any wolf noises. When he held her, she rolled in his arms like a stranded ship with the waves slamming into her. I always get the criers, he thought sadly. My girls always cry, sooner or later. But never for me.

"Don't leave me!" she wept. "I don't know why I came to live with you—I knew it wouldn't work—but don't leave me! There's just Bernice and Dr. Schechtman, and it's so lonely. I want somebody else, I get so lonely. Don't leave me, Joe. I love you, Joe. I love you."

She was patting his face as though she were blind. Farrell stroked her hair and kneaded the back of her neck, wishing that her mother would call again. He felt skilled and weary, and without desire. I'm doing it again, he thought.

"I love you," Lila said. And he answered her, thinking, I'm doing it again. That's the great advantage of making the same mistake a lot of times. You come to know it, and you can study it and get inside it, really make it yours. It's the same good old mistake, except this time the girl's hangup is different. But it's the same thing. I'm doing it again.

The building superintendent was thirty or fifty: dark, thin, quick and shivering. A Lithuanian or a Latvian, he spoke very little English. He smelled of black friction tape and stale water, and he was strong in the twisting way that a small, lean animal is strong. His eyes were almost purple, and they bulged a little, straining out—the terrible eyes of a herald angel stricken dumb. He roamed in the basement all day, banging on pipes and taking the elevator apart.

The superintendent met Lila only a few hours after Farrell did; on that first night, when she came home with him. At the sight of her the little man jumped back, dropping the two-legged chair he was carrying. He promptly fell over it, and did not try to get up, but cowered there, clucking and gulping, trying to cross himself and make the sign of the horns at the same time. Farrell started to help him up, but he screamed. They could hardly hear the sound.

It would have been merely funny and embarrassing, except for the fact that Lila was equally as frightened of the superintendent, from that moment. She would not go down to the basement for any reason, nor would she enter or leave the house until she was satisfied that he was nowhere near. Farrell had thought then that she took the superintendent for a lunatic.

"I don't know how he knows," he said to Ben. "I guess if you believe in werewolves and vampires, you probably recognize them right away. I don't believe in them at all, and I live with one."

He lived with Lila all through the autumn and the winter. They went out together and came home, and her cooking improved slightly, and she gave up the guitar and got a kitten named Theodora. Sometimes she wept, but not often. She turned out not to be a real crier.

She told Dr. Schechtman about Farrell, and he said that it would probably be a very beneficial relationship for her. It wasn't, but it wasn't a particularly bad one either. Their lovemaking was usually good, though it bothered Farrell to suspect that it was the sense and smell of the Other that excited him. For the rest, they came near being friends. Farrell had known that he did not love Lila before he found out that she was a werewolf, and this made him feel a great deal easier about being bored with her.

"It'll break up by itself in the spring," he said, "like ice."

Ben asked, "What if it doesn't?" They were having lunch in the Automat again. "What'll you do if it just goes on?"

"It's not that easy." Farrell looked away from his friend and began to explore the mysterious, swampy innards of his beef pie. He said, "The trouble is that I know her. That was the real mistake. You shouldn't get to know people if you know you're not going to stay with them, one way or another. It's all right if you come and go in ignorance, but you shouldn't know them."

A week or so before the full moon, she would start to become nervous and strident, and this would continue until the day preceding her transformation. On that day, she was invariably loving, in the tender, desperate manner of someone who is going away; but the next day would see her silent, speaking only when she had to. She always had a cold on the last day, and looked gray and patchy and sick, but she usually went to work anyway.

Farrell was sure, though she never talked about it, that the change into wolf shape was actually peaceful for her, though the returning hurt. Just before moonrise she would take off her clothes and take the pins out of her hair, and stand waiting. Farrell never managed not to close his eyes when she dropped heavily down on all fours; but there was a moment before that when her face would grow a look that he never saw at any other time, except when they were making love. Each time he saw it, it struck him as a look of wondrous joy at not being Lila any more.

"See, I know her," he tried to explain to Ben. "She only likes to go to color movies, because wolves can't see color. She can't stand the Modern Jazz Quartet, but that's all she plays the first couple of days afterward. Stupid things like that. Never gets high at parties, because she's afraid she'll start talking. It's hard to walk away, that's all. Taking what I know with me."

Ben asked, "Is she still scared of the super?"

"Oh, God," Farrell said. "She got his dog last time. It was a Dalmation—good-looking animal. She didn't know it was his. He doesn't hide when he sees her now, he just gives her a look like a stake through the heart. That man is a really classy hater, a natural. I'm scared of him myself." He stood up and began to pull on his overcoat. "I wish he'd get turned onto her mother. Get some practical use out of him. Did I tell you she wants me to call her Bernice?"

Ben said, "Farrell, if I were you, I'd leave the country. I would."

They went out into the February drizzle that sniffled back and forth between snow and rain. Farrell did not speak until they reached the corner where he turned toward the bookstore. Then he said very softly, "Damn, you have to be so careful. Who wants to know what people turn into?"

May came, and a night when Lila once again stood naked at the window, waiting for the moon. Farrell fussed with dishes and garbage bags, and fed the cat. These moments were always awkward. He had just asked her, "You want to save what's left of the rice?" when the telephone rang.

It was Lila's mother. She called two and three times a week now. "This is Bernice. How's my Irisher this evening?"

"I'm fine, Bernice," Farrell said. Lila suddenly threw back her head and drew a heavy, whining breath. The cat hissed silently and ran into the bathroom.

"I called to inveigle you two uptown this Friday," Mrs. Braun said. "A couple of old friends are coming over, and I know if I don't get some young people in we'll just sit around and talk about what went wrong with the Progressive party. The Old Left. So if you could sort of sweet-talk our girl into spending an evening in Squaresville—"

"I'll have to check with Lila." She's *doing* it, he thought, that terrible woman. Every time I talk to her, I sound married. I see what she's doing, but she goes right ahead anyway. He said, "I'll talk to her in the morning." Lila struggled in the moonlight, between dancing and drowning.

"Oh," Mrs. Braun said. "Yes, of course. Have her call me back." She sighed. "It's such a comfort to me to know you're there. Ask her if I should fix a fondue."

Lila made a handsome wolf: tall and broad-chested for a female, moving as easily as water sliding over stone. Her coat was dark brown, showing red in the proper light, and there were white places on her breast. She had pale green eyes, the color of the sky when a hurricane is coming.

Usually she was gone as soon as the changing was over, for she never cared for him to see her in her wolf form. But tonight she came slowly toward him, walking in a strange way, with her hindquarters almost dragging. She was making a high, soft sound, and her eyes were not focusing on him.

"What is it?" he asked foolishly. The wolf whined and skulked under the table, rubbing against the leg. Then she lay on her belly and rolled and as she did so the sound grew in her throat until it became an odd, sad, thin cry; not a hunting howl, but a shiver of longing turned into breath.

"Jesus, don't do that!" Farrell gasped. But she sat up and howled again, and a dog answered her from somewhere near the river. She wagged her tail and whimpered.

Farrell said, "The super'll be up here in two minutes flat. What's the matter with you?" He heard footsteps and low frightened voices in the apartment above them. Another dog howled, this one nearby, and the wolf wriggled a little way toward the window on her haunches, like a baby, scooting. She looked at him over her shoulder, shuddering violently. On an impulse, he picked up the phone and called her mother.

Watching the wolf as she rocked and slithered and moaned, he described her actions to Mrs. Braun. "I've never seen her like this," he said. "I don't know what's the matter with her."

"Oh, my God," Mrs. Braun whispered. She told him.

When he was silent, she began to speak very rapidly. "It hasn't happened for such a long time. Schechtman gives her pills, but she must have run out and forgotten—she's always been like that, since she was little. All the thermos bottles she used to leave on the school bus, and every week her piano music—"

"I wish you'd told me before," he said. He was edging very cautiously toward the open window. The pupils of the wolf's eyes were pulsing with her quick breaths.

"It isn't a thing you tell people!" Lila's mother wailed in his ears. "How do you think it was for me when she brought her first little boyfriend—" Farrell dropped the phone and sprang for the window. He had the inside track, and he might have made it, but she turned her head and snarled so wildly that he fell back. When he reached the window, she was already two fire-escape landings below, and there was eager yelping waiting for her in the street.

Dangling and turning just above the floor, Mrs. Braun heard Farrell's distant yell, followed immediately by a heavy thumping on the door. A strange, tattered voice was shouting unintelligibly beyond the knocking. Footsteps crashed by the receiver and the door opened.

"My dog, my dog!" the strange voice mourned. "My dog, my dog, my dog!"

"I'm sorry about your dog," Farrell said. "Look, please go away. I've got work to do."

"I got work," the voice said. "I know my work." It climbed and spilled into another language, out of which English words jutted like broken bones. "Where is she? Where is she? She kill my dog."

"She's not here." Farrell's own voice changed on the last word. It seemed a long time before he said, "You'd better put that away."

Mrs. Braun heard the howl as clearly as though the wolf were running beneath her own window: lonely and insatiable, with a kind of gasping laughter in it. The other voice began to scream. Mrs. Braun caught the phrase *silver bullet* several times. The door slammed; then opened and slammed again.

Farrell was the only man of his own acquaintance who was able to play back his dreams while he was having them: to stop them in mid-flight, no matter how fearful they might be—or how lovely—and run them over and over studying them in his sleep, until the most terrifying reel became at once utterly harmless and unbearably familiar. This night that he spent running after Lila was like that.

He would find them congregated under the marquee of an apartment house, or romping around the moonscape of a construction site: ten or fifteen males of all races, creeds, colors, and previous conditions of servitude; whining and yapping, pissing against tires, inhaling indiscriminately each other and the lean, grinning bitch they surrounded. She frightened them, for she growled more wickedly than coyness demanded, and where she snapped, even in play, bone showed. Still they tumbled on her and over her, biting her neck and ears in their turn; and she snarled but she did not run away.

Never, at least, until Farrell came charging upon them, shrieking like any cuckold, kicking at the snuffling lovers. Then she would turn and race off into the spring dark, with her thin, dreamy howl floating behind her like the train of a smoky gown. The dogs followed, and so did Farrell, calling and cursing. They always lost him quickly, that jubilant marriage procession, leaving him stumbling down rusty iron ladders into places where he fell over garbage cans. Yet he would come upon them as inevitably in time, loping along Broadway or trotting across Columbus Avenue toward the Park; he would hear them in the tennis courts near the river, breaking down the nets over Lila and her moment's Ares. There were dozens of them now, coming from all directions. They stank of their joy, and he threw stones at them and shouted, and they ran.

And the wolf ran at their head, on sidewalks and on wet grass; her tail waving contentedly, but her eyes still hungry, and her howl growing ever more warning than wistful. Farrell knew that she must have blood before sunrise, and that it was both useless and dangerous to follow her. But the night wound and unwound itself, and he knew the same things over and over, and ran down the same streets, and saw the same couples walk wide of him, thinking he was drunk.

Mrs. Braun kept leaping out of a taxi that pulled up next to him; usually at corners where the dogs had just piled by, knocking over the crates stacked in market doorways and spilling the newspapers at the subway kiosks. Standing in broccoli, in black taffeta, with a front like a ferryboat—yet as lean in the hips as her wolf-daughter—with her plum-colored hair all loose, one arm lifted, and her orange mouth pursed in a bellow, she was no longer Bernice but a wronged fertility goddess getting set to blast the harvest. "We've got to split up!" she would roar at Farrell, and each time it sounded like a sound idea. Yet he looked for her whenever he lost Lila's trail, because she never did.

The superintendent kept turning up too, darting after Farrell out of alleys or cellar entrances, or popping from the freight elevators that load through the sidewalk. Farrell would hear his numberless passkeys clicking on the flat piece of wood tucked into his belt.

"You see her? You see her, the wolf, kill my dog?" Under the fat, ugly moon, the Army .45 glittered and trembled like his own mad eyes.

"Mark with a cross." He would pat the barrel of the gun and shake it under Farrell's nose like maracas. "Mark with a cross, bless by a priest. Three silver bullets. She kill my dog."

Lila's voice would come sailing to them then, from up in Harlem or away near Lincoln Center, and the little man would whirl and dash down into the earth, disappearing into the crack between two slabs of sidewalk. Farrell understood quite clearly that the superintendent was hunting Lila underground, using the keys that only superintendents have to take elevators down to the black sub-sub-basements, far below the bicycle rooms and the wet, shaking laundry rooms, and below the furnace rooms, below the passages walled with electricity meters and roofed with burly steam pipes; down to the realms where the great dim water mains roll like whales, and the gas lines hump and preen, down where the roots of the apartment houses fade together; and so along under the city, scrabbling through secret ways with silver bullets, and his keys rapping against the piece of wood. He never saw Lila, but he was never very far behind her.

Cutting across parking lots, pole-vaulting between locked bumpers, edging and dancing his way through fluorescent gaggles of haughty children; leaping uptown like a salmon against the current of the theater crowds; walking quickly past the random killing faces that floated down the night tide like unexploded mines, and especially avoiding the crazy faces that wanted to tell him what it was like to be crazy—so Farrell pursued Lila Braun, of Tremont Avenue and CCNY, in the city all night long. Nobody offered to help him, or tried to head off the dangerous-looking bitch bounding along with the delirious raggle of admirers streaming after her; but then, the dogs had to fight through the same clenched legs and vengeful bodies that Farrell did. The crowds slowed Lila down, but he felt relieved whenever she turned towards the emptier streets. *She must have blood soon, somewhere.*

Farrell's dreams eventually lost their clear edge after he played them back a certain number of times, and so it was with the night. The full moon skidded down the sky, thinning like a tatter of butter in a skillet, and remembered scenes began to fold sloppily into each other. The sound of Lila and the dogs grew fainter whichever way he followed. Mrs. Braun blinked on and off at longer intervals; and in dark doorways and under subway gratings, the superintendent burned like a corposant, making the barrel of his pistol run rainbow. At last he lost Lila for good, and with that it seemed that he woke.

It was still night, but not dark, and he was walking slowly home on Riverside Drive through a cool, grainy fog. The moon had set, but the river was strangely bright: glittering gray as far up as the Bridge, where headlights left shiny, wet paths like snails. There was no one else on the street.

"Dumb broad," he said aloud. "The hell with it. She wants to mess around, let her mess around." He wondered whether werewolves could have cubs, and what sort of cubs they might be. Lila must have turned on the dogs by now, for the blood. Poor dogs, he thought. They were all so dirty and innocent and happy with her.

"A moral lesson for all of us," he announced sententiously. "Don't fool with strange, eager ladies, they'll kill you." He was a little hysterical. Then, two blocks ahead of him, he saw the gaunt shape in the gray light of the river; alone now, and hurrying. Farrell did not call to her, but as soon as he began to run, the wolf wheeled and faced him. Even at that distance, her eyes were stained and streaked and wild. She showed all the teeth on one side of her mouth, and she growled like fire.

Farrell trotted steadily toward her, crying, "Go home, go home! Lila, you dummy, get on home, it's morning!" She growled terribly, but when Farrell was less than a block away she turned again and dashed across the street, heading for West End Avenue. Farrell said, "Good girl, that's it," and limped after her.

In the hours before sunrise on West End Avenue, many people came out to walk their dogs. Farrell had done it often with poor Grunewald to know many of the dawn walkers by sight, and some to talk to. A fair number of them were whores and homosexuals, both of whom always seem to have dogs in New York. Quietly, almost always alone, they drifted up and down the Nineties, piloted by their small, fussy beasts, but moving in a kind of fugitive truce with the city and the night that was ending. Farrell sometimes fancied that they were all asleep, and that this hour was the only true rest they ever got.

He recognized Robie by his two dogs, Scone and Crumpet. Robie lived in the apartment directly below Farrell's, usually unhappily. The dogs were horrifying little homebrews of Chihuahua and Yorkshire terrier, but Robie loved them.

Crumpet, the male, saw Lila first. He gave a delighted yap of welcome and proposition (according to Robie, Scone bored him, and he liked big girls anyway) and sprang to meet her, yanking his leash through Robie's slack hand. The wolf was almost upon him before he realized his fatal misunderstanding and scuttled desperately in retreat, meowing with utter terror.

Robie wailed, and Farrell ran as fast as he could, but Lila knocked Crumpet off his feet and slashed his throat while he was still in the air. Then she crouched on the body, nuzzling it in a dreadful way.

Robie actually came within a step of leaping upon Lila and trying to drag her away from his dead dog. Instead, he turned on Farrell as he came panting up, and began hitting him with a good deal of strength and accuracy. "Damn you, damn you!" he sobbed. Little Scone ran away around the corner, screaming like a mandrake.

Farrell put up his arms and went with the punches, all the while yelling at Lila until his voice ripped. But the blood frenzy had her, and Farrell had never imagined what she must be like at those times. Somehow she had spared the dogs who had loved her all night, but she was nothing but thirst now. She pushed and kneaded Crumpet's body as though she were nursing.

All along the avenue, the morning dogs were barking like trumpets. Farrell ducked away from Robie's soft fists and saw them coming; tripping over their trailing leashes, running too fast for their stubby legs. They were small, spoiled beasts, most of them, overweight and shortwinded, and many were not young. Their owners cried unmanly pet names after them, but they waddled gallantly toward their deaths, barking promises far bigger than themselves, and none of them looked back.

She looked up with her muzzle red to the eyes. The dogs did falter then, for they knew murder when they smelled it, and even their silly, nearsighted eyes understood vaguely what creature faced them. But they knew the smell of love too, and they were all gentlemen.

She killed the first two to reach her—a spitz and a cocker spaniel—with two snaps of her jaws. But before she could settle down to her meal, three Pekes were scrambling up to her, though they would have had to stand on each others' shoulders. Lila whirled without a sound, and they fell away, rolling and yelling but unhurt. As soon as she turned, the Pekes were at her again, joined now by a couple of valiant poodles. Lila got one of the poodles when she turned again.

Robie had stopped beating on Farrell, and was leaning against a traffic light, being sick. But other people were running up now: a middle-aged black man, crying; a plump youth in a plastic car coat and bedroom slippers, who kept whimpering, "Oh God, she's eating them, look at her, she's really eating them!" two lean, ageless girls in slacks, both with foamy beige hair. They all called wildly to their unheeding dogs, and they all grabbed at Farrell and shouted in his face. Cars began to stop.

The sky was thin and cool, rising pale gold, but Lila paid no attention to it. She was ramping under the swarm of little dogs; rearing and spinning in circles, snarling blood. The dogs were terrified and bewildered, but they never swerved from their labor. The smell of love told them that they were welcome, however ungraciously she seemed to receive them. Lila shook herself, and a pair of squealing dachshunds, hobbled in a double harness, tumbled across the sidewalk to end at Farrell's feet. They scrambled up and immediately towed themselves back into the maelstrom. Lila bit one of them almost in half, but the other dachshund went on trying to climb her hindquarters, dragging his ripped comrade with him. Farrell began to laugh.

The black man said, "You think it's funny?" and hit him. Farrell sat down, still laughing. The man stood over him, embarrassed, offering Farrell his handkerchief. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," he said. "But your dog killed my dog."

"She isn't my dog," Farrell said. He moved to let a man pass between them, and then saw that it was the superintendent, holding his pistol with both hands. Nobody noticed him until he fired; but Farrell pushed one of the foamy-haired girls, and she stumbled against the superintendent as the gun went off. The silver bullet broke a window in a parked car.

The superintendent fired again while the echoes of the first shot were still clapping back and forth between the houses. A Pomeranian screamed that time, and a woman cried out, "Oh, my God, he shot Borgy!" But the crowd was crumbling away, breaking into its individual components like pills on television. The watching cars had sped off at sight of the gun, and the faces that had been peering down from windows disappeared. Except for Farrell, the few people who remained were scattered halfway down the block. The sky was brightening swiftly now.

"For God's sake, don't let him!" the same woman called from the shelter of a doorway. But two men made shushing gestures at her, saying, "It's all right, he knows how to use that thing. Go ahead, buddy."

The shots had at last frightened the little dogs away from Lila. She crouched among the twitching splotches of fur, with her muzzle wrinkled back and her eyes more black than green. Farrell saw a plaid rag that had been a dog jacket protruding from under her body. The superintendent stooped and squinted over the gun barrel, aiming with grotesque care, while the men cried to him to shoot. He was too far from the werewolf for her to reach him before he fired the last silver bullet, thought he would surely die before she died. His lips were moving as he took aim.

Two long steps would have brought Farrell up behind the superintendent. Later he told himself that he had been afraid of the pistol, because that was easier than remembering how he had felt when he looked at Lila. Her tongue never stopped lapping around her dark jaws; and even as she set herself to spring, she lifted a bloody paw to her mouth. Farrell thought of her padding in the bedroom, breathing on his face. The superintendent grunted and Farrell closed his eyes. Yet even then he expected to find himself doing something.

Then he heard Mrs. Braun's unmistakable voice. "*Don't you dare!*" She was standing between Lila and the superintendent: one shoe gone, and the heel off the other one; her knit dress torn at the shoulder, and her face tired and smudgy. But she pointed a finger at the startled superintendent, and he stepped quickly back, as though she had a pistol too.

"Lady, that's a wolf," he protested nervously. "Lady, you please get, get out of the way. That's a wolf, I go shoot her now."

"I want to see your license for that gun." Mrs. Braun held out her hand. The superintendent blinked at her, muttering in despair. She said, "Do you know that you can be sent to prison for twenty years for carrying a concealed weapon in this state? Do you know what the fine is for having a gun without a license? The fine is Five. Thousand. Dollars." The men down the street were shouting at her, but she swung around to face the creature snarling among the little dead dogs.

"Come on, Lila," she said. "Come on home with Bernice. I'll make tea and we'll talk. It's been a long time since we've really talked, you know? We used to have nice long talks when you were little, but we don't anymore." The wolf had stopped growling, but she was crouching even lower, and her ears were still flat against her head. Mrs. Braun said, "Come on, baby. Listen, I know what—you'll call in sick at the office and stay for a few days. You'll get a good rest, and maybe we'll even look around a little for a new doctor, what do you say? Schechtman hasn't done a thing for you, I never liked him. Come on home, honey. Momma's here, Bernice knows." She took a step toward the silent wolf, holding out her hand.

The superintendent gave a desperate, wordless cry and pumped forward, clumsily shoving Mrs. Braun to one side. He leveled the pistol point-blank, wailing, "My dog, my dog!" Lila was in the air when the gun went off, and her shadow sprang after her, for the sun had risen. She crumpled down across a couple of dead Pekes. Their blood dabbled her breasts and her pale throat.

Mrs. Braun screamed like a lunch whistle. She knocked the superintendent into the street and sprawled over Lila, hiding her completely from Farrell's sight. "Lila, Lila," she keened her daughter, "poor baby, you never had a chance. He killed you because you were different, the way they kill everything different." Farrell approached her and stooped down, but she pushed him against a wall without looking up. "Lila, Lila, poor baby, poor darling, maybe it's better, maybe you're happy now. You never had a chance, poor Lila."

The dog owners were edging slowly back, and the surviving dogs were running to them. The superintendent squatted on the curb with his head in his arms. A weary, muffled voice said, "For God's sake, Bernice, would you get up off me? You don't have to stop yelling, just get off."

When she stood up, the cars began to stop in the street again. It made it very difficult for the police to get through.

Nobody pressed charges, because there was no one to lodge them against. The killer dog—or wolf, as some insisted—was gone; and if she had an owner, he could not be found. As for the people who had actually seen the wolf turn into a young girl when the sunlight touched her, most of them managed not to have seen it, though they never really forgot. There were a few who knew quite well what they had seen, and never forgot it either, but they never said anything. They did, however, chip in to pay the superintendent's fine for possessing an unlicensed handgun. Farrell gave what he could.

Lila vanished out of Farrell's life before sunset. She did not go uptown with her mother, but packed her things and went to stay with friends in the Village. Later he heard that she was living on Christopher Street; and later still, that she had moved to Berkeley and gone back to school. He never saw her again.

"It had to be like that," he told Ben once. "We got to know too much about each other. See, there's another side to knowing. She couldn't look at me."

"You mean because you saw her with all those dogs? Or because she knew you'd have let that little nut shoot her?" Farrell shook his head.

"It was that, I guess, but it was more something else, something I know. When she sprang, just as he shot at her that last time, she wasn't leaping at him. She was going straight for her mother. She'd have got her too, if it hadn't been sunrise."

Ben whistled softly. "I wonder if her old lady knows."

"Bernice knows everything about Lila," Farrell said.

Mrs. Braun called him nearly two years later to tell him that Lila was getting married. It must have cost her a good deal of money and ingenuity to find him (where Farrell was living then, the telephone line was open for four hours a day), but he knew by the spitefulness in the static that she considered it money well spent.

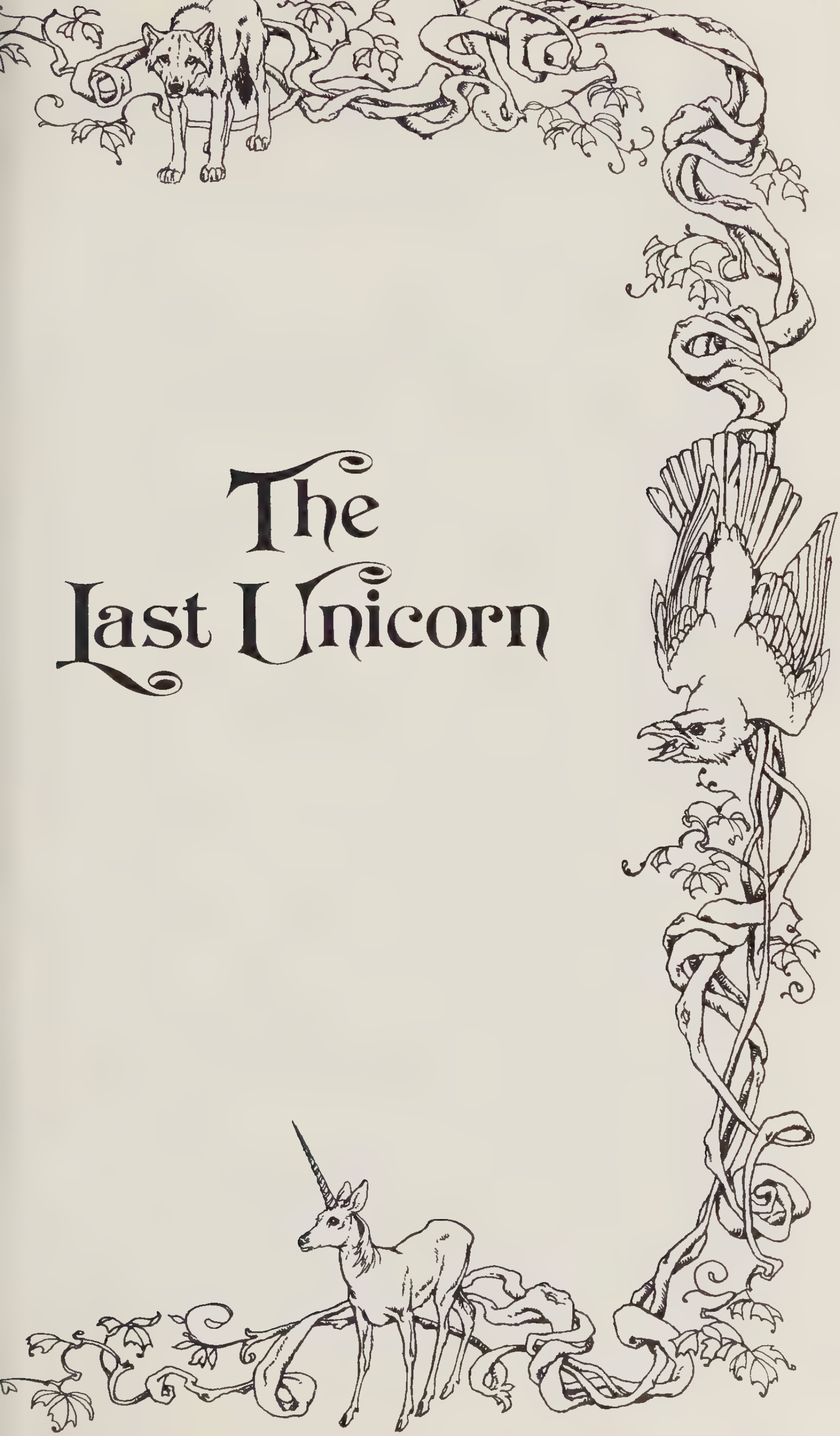
"He's at Stanford," she crackled. "A research psychologist. They're going to Japan for their honeymoon."

"That's fine," Farrell said. "I'm really happy for her, Bernice." He hesitated before he asked, "Does he know about Lila? I mean, about what happens—?"

"Does he know?" she cried. "He's proud of it—he thinks it's wonderful! It's his field!"

"That's great. That's fine. Goodbye, Bernice. I really am glad."

And he was glad, and a little wistful, thinking about it. The girl he was living with here had a really strange hangup.



The Last Unicorn

I

The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone. She was very old, though she did not know it, and she was no longer the careless color of sea foam, but rather the color of snow falling on a moonlit night. But her eyes were still clear and unwearied, and she still moved like a shadow on the sea.

She did not look anything like a horned horse, as unicorns are often pictured, being smaller and cloven-hoofed, and possessing that oldest, wildest grace that horses have never had, that deer have only in a shy, thin imitation and goats in dancing mockery. Her neck was long and slender, making her head seem smaller than it was, and the mane that fell almost to the middle of her back was as soft as dandelion fluff and as fine as cirrus. She had pointed ears and thin legs, with feathers of white hair at the ankles; and the long horn above her eyes shone and shivered with its own seashell light even in the deepest midnight. She had killed dragons with it, and healed a king whose poisoned wound would not close, and knocked down ripe chestnuts for bear cubs.

Unicorns are immortal. It is their nature to live alone in one place: usually a forest where there is a pool clear enough for them to see themselves—for they are a little vain, knowing themselves to be the most beautiful creatures in all the world, and magic besides. They mate very rarely, and no place is more enchanted than one where a unicorn has been born. The last time she had seen another unicorn the young virgins who still came seeking her now and then had called to her in a different tongue; but then, she had no idea of months and years and centuries, or even of seasons. It was always spring in her forest, because she lived there, and she wandered all day among the great beech trees, keeping watch over the animals that lived in the ground and under bushes, in nests and caves, earths and treetops. Generation after generation, wolves and rabbits alike, they hunted and loved and had children and died, and as the unicorn did none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them.

One day it happened that two men with long bows rode through her forest, hunting for deer. The unicorn followed them, moving so warily that not even the horses knew she was near. The sight of men filled her with an old, slow, strange mixture of tenderness and terror. She never let one see her if she could help it, but she liked to watch them ride by and hear them talking.

"I mislike the feel of this forest," the elder of the two hunters grumbled. "Creatures that live in a unicorn's wood learn a little magic of their own in time, mainly concerned with disappearing. We'll find no game here."

"Unicorns are long gone," the second man said. "If, indeed, they ever were. This is a forest like any other."

"Then why do the leaves never fall here, or the snow? I tell you, there is one unicorn left in the world—good luck to the lonely old thing, I say—and as long as it lives in this forest, there won't be a hunter who takes so much as a titmouse home at his saddle. Ride on, ride on, you'll see. I know their ways, unicorns."

"From books," answered the other. "Only from books and tales and songs. Not in the reign of three kings has there been even a whisper of a unicorn seen in this country or any other. You know no more about unicorns than I do, for I've read the same books and heard the same stories, and I've never seen one either."

The first hunter was silent for a time, and the second whistled sourly to himself. Then the first said, "My great-grandmother saw a unicorn once. She used to tell me about it when I was little."

"Oh, indeed? And did she capture it with a golden bridle?"

"No. She didn't have one. You don't have to have a golden bridle to catch a unicorn; that part's the fairy tale. You need only to be pure of heart."

"Yes, yes." The younger man chuckled. "Did she ride her unicorn, then? Bareback, under the trees, like a nymph in the early days of the world?"

"My great-grandmother was afraid of large animals," said the first hunter. "She didn't ride it, but she sat very still, and the unicorn put its head in her lap and fell asleep. My great-grandmother never moved till it woke."

"What did it look like? Pliny describes the unicorn as being very ferocious, similar in the rest of its body to a horse, with the head of a deer, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a bear;

a deep, bellowing voice, and a single black horn, two cubits in length. And the Chinese—"

"My great-grandmother said only that the unicorn had a good smell. She never could abide the smell of any beast, even a cat or a cow, let alone a wild thing. But she loved the smell of the unicorn. She began to cry once, telling me about it. Of course, she was a very old woman then, and cried at anything that reminded her of her youth."

"Let's turn around and hunt somewhere else," the second hunter said abruptly. The unicorn stepped softly into a thicket as they turned their horses, and took up the trail only when they were well ahead of her once more. The men rode in silence until they were nearing the edge of the forest, when the second hunter asked quietly, "Why did they go away, do you think? If there ever were such things."

"Who knows? Times change. Would you call this age a good one for unicorns?"

"No, but I wonder if any man before us ever thought his time a good time for unicorns. And it seems to me now that I have heard stories—but I was sleepy with wine, or I was thinking of something else. Well, no matter. There's light enough yet to hunt, if we hurry. Come!"

They broke out of the woods, kicked their horses to a gallop, and dashed away. But before they were out of sight, the first hunter looked back over his shoulder and called, just as though he could see the unicorn standing in shadow, "Stay where you are, poor beast. This is no world for you. Stay in your forest, and keep your trees green and your friends long-lived. Pay no mind to young girls, for they never become anything more than silly old women. And good luck to you."

The unicorn stood still at the edge of the forest and said aloud, "I am the only unicorn there is." They were the first words she had spoken, even to herself, in more than a hundred years.

That can't be, she thought. She had never minded being alone, never seeing another unicorn, because she had always known that there were others like her in the world, and a unicorn needs no more than that for company. "But I would know if all the others were gone. I'd be gone too. Nothing can happen to them that does not happen to me."

Her own voice frightened her and made her want to be running. She moved along the dark paths of her forest, swift and shining, passing through sudden clearings unbearably brilliant with grass or soft with shadow, aware of everything around her, from the weeds that brushed her ankles to insect-quick flickers of blue and silver as the wind lifted the leaves. "Oh, I could never leave this, I never could, not if I really were the only unicorn in the world. I know how to live here, I know how everything smells, and tastes, and is. What could I ever search for in the world, except this again?"

But when she stopped running at last and stood still, listening to crows and a quarrel of squirrels over her head, she wondered, But suppose they are riding together, somewhere far away? What if they are hiding and waiting for me?

From that first moment of doubt, there was no peace for her; from the time she first imagined leaving her forest, she could not stand in one place without wanting to be somewhere else. She trotted up and down beside her pool, restless and unhappy. Unicorns are not meant to make choices. She said no, and yes, and no again, day and night, and for the first time she began to feel the minutes crawling over her like worms. "I will not go. Because men have seen no unicorns for a while does not mean they have all vanished. Even if it were true, I would not go. I live here."

But at last she woke up in the middle of one warm night and said, "Yes, but now." She hurried through her forest, trying to look at nothing and smell nothing, trying not to feel her earth under her cloven hoofs. The animals who move in the dark, the owls and the foxes and the deer, raised their heads as she passed by, but she would not look at them. I must go quickly, she thought, and come back as soon as I can. Maybe I won't have to go very far. But whether I find the others or not, I will come back very soon, as soon as I can.

Under the moon, the road that ran from the edge of her forest gleamed like water, but when she stepped out onto it, away from the trees, she felt how hard it was, and how long. She almost turned back then; but instead she took a deep breath of the woods air that still drifted to her, and held it in her mouth like a flower, as long as she could.

The long road hurried to nowhere and had no end. It ran through villages and small towns, flat country and mountains, stony barrens and meadows springing out of stones, but it belonged to none of these, and it never rested anywhere. It rushed the unicorn along, tugging at her feet like the tide, fretting at her, never letting her be quiet and listen to the air, as she was used to do. Her eyes were always full of dust, and her mane was stiff and heavy with dirt.

Time had always passed her by in her forest, but now it was she who passed through time as she traveled. The colors of the trees changed, and the animals along the way grew heavy coats and lost them again; the clouds crept or hurried before the changing winds, and were pink and gold in the sun or livid with storm. Wherever she went, she searched for her people, but she found no trace of them, and in all the tongues she heard spoken along the road there was not even a word for them any more.

Early one morning, about to turn off the road to sleep, she saw a man hoeing in his garden. Knowing that she should hide, she stood still instead and watched him work, until he straightened and saw her. He was fat, and his cheeks jumped with every step he took. "Oh," he said. "Oh, you're beautiful."

When he tugged off his belt, made a loop in it, and moved clumsily toward her, the unicorn was more pleased than frightened. The man knew what she was, and what he himself was for: to hoe turnips and pursue something that shone and could run faster than he could. She sidestepped his first lunge as lightly as though the wind of it had blown her out of his reach. "I have been hunted with bells and banners in my time," she told him. "Men knew that the only way to hunt me was to make the chase so wondrous that I would come near to see it. And even so I was never once captured."

"My foot must have slipped," said the man. "Steady now, you pretty thing."

"I've never really understood," the unicorn mused as the man picked himself up, "what you dream of doing with me, once you've caught me." The man leaped again, and she slipped away from him like rain. "I don't think you know yourselves," she said.

"Ah, steady, steady, easy now." The man's sweating face was striped with dirt, and he could hardly get his breath. "Pretty," he gasped. "You pretty little mare."

"*Mare?*" The unicorn trumpeted the word so shrilly that the man stopped pursuing her and clapped his hands to his ears. "Mare?" she demanded, "I, a horse? Is that what you take me for? Is that what you see?"

"Good horse," the fat man panted. He leaned on the fence and wiped his face. "Curry you up, clean you off, you'll be the prettiest old mare anywhere." He reached out with the belt again. "Take you to the fair," he said. "Come on, horse."

"A horse," the unicorn said. "That's what you were trying to capture. A white mare with her mane full of burrs." As the man approached her, she hooked her horn through the belt, jerked it out of his grasp, and hurled it across the road into a patch of daisies. "A horse, am I?" she snorted. "A horse, indeed!"

For a moment the man was very close to her, and her great eyes stared into his own, which were small and tired and amazed. Then she turned and fled up the road, running so swiftly that those who saw her exclaimed, "Now *there's* a horse! There's a real horse!" One old man said quietly to his wife, "That's an Ayrab horse. I was on a ship with an Ayrab horse once."

From that time the unicorn avoided towns, even at night, unless there was no way at all to go around them. Even so, there were a few men who gave chase, but always to a wandering white mare; never in the gay and reverent manner proper to the pursuit of a unicorn. They came with ropes and nets and baits of sugar lumps, and they whistled and called her Bess and Nellie. Sometimes she would slow down enough to let their horses catch her scent, and then watch as the beasts reared and wheeled and ran away with their terrified riders. The horses always knew her.

"How can it be?" she wondered. "I suppose I could understand it if men had simply forgotten unicorns or if they had changed so that they hated all unicorns now and tried to kill them when they saw them. But not to see them at all, to look at them and see something else—what do they look like to one another, then? What do trees look like to them, or houses, or real horses, or their own children?"

Sometimes she thought, "If men no longer know what they are looking at, there may well be unicorns in the world yet, unknown and glad of it." But she knew beyond both hope and vanity that men had changed, and the world with them, because the unicorns were gone. Yet she went on along the hard road, although each day she wished a little more that she had never left her forest.

Then one afternoon the butterfly wobbled out of a breeze and lit on the tip of her horn. He was velvet all over, dark and dusty, with golden spots on his wings, and he was as thin as a flower petal. Dancing along her horn, he saluted her with his curling feelers. "I am a roving gambler. How do you do?"

The unicorn laughed for the first time in her travels. "Butterfly, what are you doing out on such a windy day?" she asked him. "You'll take cold and die long before your time."

"Death takes what man would keep," said the butterfly, "and leaves what man would lose. Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks. I warm my hands before the fire of life and get four-way relief." He glimmered like a scrap of owl-light on her horn.

"Do you know what I am, butterfly?" the unicorn asked hopefully, and he replied. "Excellent well, you're a fishmonger. You're my everything, you are my sunshine, you are old and gray and full of sleep, you're my pickle-face, consumptive Mary Jane." He paused, fluttering his wings against the wind, and added conversationally, "Your name is a golden bell hung in my heart. I would break my body to pieces to call you once by your name."

"Say my name, then," the unicorn begged him. "If you know my name, tell it to me."

"Rumpelstiltskin," the butterfly answered happily. "Gotcha! You don't get no medal." He jigged and twinkled on her horn, singing, "Won't you come home, Bill Bailey, won't you come home, where once he could not go. Buckle down, Winsocki, go and catch a falling star. Clay lies still, but blood's a rover, so I should be called kill-devil all the parish over." His eyes were gleaming scarlet in the glow of the unicorn's horn.

She sighed and plodded on, both amused and disappointed. It serves you right, she told herself. You know better than to expect a butterfly to know your name. All they know are songs and poetry, and anything else they hear. They mean well, but they can't keep things straight. And why should they? They die so soon.

The butterfly swaggered before her eyes, singing, "One, two, three o'lairy," as he whirled; chanting, "Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, look down that lonesome road. For, oh, what damned minutes tells he o'er who dotes, yet doubts. Hasten, Mirth, and bring with thee a host of furious fancies whereof I am commander, which will be on sale for three days only at bargain summer prices. I love you, I love you, oh, the horror, the horror, and aroint thee, witch, aroint thee, indeed and truly you've chosen a bad place to be lame in, willow, willow, willow." His voice tinkled in the unicorn's head like silver money falling.

He traveled with her for the rest of the waning day, but when the sun went down and the sky was full of rosy fish, he flew off her horn and hovered in the air before her. "I must take the A train," he said politely. Against the clouds she could see that his velvet wings were ribbed with delicate black veins.

"Farewell," she said. "I hope you hear many more songs"

—which was the best way she could think of to say good-by to a butterfly. But instead of leaving her, he fluttered above her head, looking suddenly less dashing and a little nervous in the blue evening air. "Fly away," she urged him. "It's too cold for you to be out." But the butterfly still dallied, humming to himself.

"They ride that horse you call the Macedonai," he intoned absent-mindedly; and then, very clearly, "Unicorn. Old French, *unicorne*. Latin, *unicornis*. Literally, one-horned: *unus*, one and *cornu*, a horn. A fabulous animal resembling a horse with one horn. Oh, I am a cook and a captain bold and the mate of the *Nancy* brig. Has anybody here seen Kelly?" He strutted joyously in the air, and the first fireflies blinked around him in wonder and grave doubt.

The unicorn was so startled and so happy to hear her name spoken at last that she overlooked the remark about the horse. "Oh, you do know me!" she cried, and the breath of her delight blew the butterfly twenty feet away. When he came scrambling back to her, she pleaded, "Butterfly, if you really know who I am, tell me if you have ever seen anyone like me, tell me which way I must go to find them. Where have they gone?"

"Butterfly, butterfly, where shall I hide?" he sang in the fading light. "The sweet and bitter fool will presently appear. Christ, that my love were in my arms, and I in my bed again." He rested on the unicorn's horn once more, and she could feel him trembling.

"Please," she said. "All I want to know is that there are other unicorns somewhere in the world. Butterfly, tell me that there are still others like me, and I will believe you and go home to my forest. I have been away so long, and I said that I would come back soon."

"Over the mountains of the moon," the butterfly began, "down the Valley of the Shadow, ride, boldly ride." Then he stopped suddenly and said in a strange voice, "No, no, listen, don't listen to me, listen. You can find your people if you are brave. They passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them and covered their footprints. Let nothing you dismay, but don't be half-safe." His wings brushed against the unicorn's skin.

"The Red Bull?" she asked. "What is the Red Bull?"

The butterfly started to sing. "Follow me down. Follow me down. Follow me down. Follow me down." But then he shook his head wildly and recited, "His firstling bull has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he shall push the peoples, all of them, to the ends of the earth. Listen, listen, listen quickly."

"I am listening," the unicorn cried. "Where are my people, and what is the Red Bull?"

But the butterfly swooped close to her ear, laughing. "I have nightmares about crawling around on the ground," he sang. "The little dogs, Tray, Blanche, Sue, they bark at me, the little snakes, they hiss at me, the beggars are coming to town. Then at last come the clams."

For a moment more he danced in the dusk before her; then he shivered away into the violet shadows by the roadside, chanting defiantly, "It's you or me, moth! Hand to hand to hand to hand to hand . . ." The last the unicorn saw of him was a tiny skittering between the trees, and her eyes might have deceived her, for the night was full of wings now.

At least he did recognize me, she thought sadly. That means something. But she answered herself, No, that means nothing at all, except that somebody once made up a song about unicorns, or a poem. But the Red Bull. What could he have meant by that? Another song, I suppose.

She walked on slowly, and the night drew close about her. The sky was low and almost pure black, save for one spot of yellowing silver where the moon paced behind the thick clouds. The unicorn sang softly to herself, a song she had heard a young girl singing in her forest long ago.

"Sparrows and cats will live in my shoe,
Sooner than I will live with you.
Fish will come walking out of the sea,
Sooner than you will come back to me."

She did not understand the words, but the song made her think longingly of her home. It seemed to her that she had heard autumn beginning to shake the beech trees the very moment that she stepped out into the road.

At last she lay down in the cold grass and fell asleep. Unicorns are the wariest of all wild things, but they sleep soundly when they sleep. All the same, if she had not been dreaming of home, she would surely have roused at the sound of wheels and jingling coming closer through the night, even though the wheels were muffled in rags and the little bells wrapped in wool. But she was very far away, farther than the soft bells could go, and she did not wake.

There were nine wagons, each draped in black, each drawn by a lean black horse, and each baring barred sides like teeth when the wind blew through the black hangings. The lead wagon was driven by a squat old woman, and it bore signs on its shrouded sides that said in big letters; MOMMY FORTUNA'S MIDNIGHT CARNIVAL. And below, in smaller print: *Creatures of night, brought to light.*

When the first wagon drew even with the place where the unicorn lay asleep, the old woman suddenly pulled her black horse to a stop. All the other wagons stopped too and waited silently as the old woman swung herself to the ground with an ugly grace. Gliding close to the unicorn, she peered down at her for a long time, and then said, "Well. Well, bless my old husk of a heart. And here I thought I'd seen the last of them." Her voice left a flavor of honey and gunpowder on the air.

"If he knew," she said and she showed pebbly teeth as she smiled. "But I don't think I'll tell him." She looked back at the black wagons and snapped her fingers twice. The drivers of the second and third wagons got down and came toward her. One was short and dark and stony, like herself; the other was a tall thin man with an air of resolute bewilderment. He wore an old black cloak, and his eyes were green.

"What do you see?" the old woman asked the short man. "Rukh, what do you see lying there?"

"Dead horse," he answered. "No, not dead. Give it to the manticore, or the dragon." His chuckle sounded like matches striking.

"You're a fool," Mommy Fortuna said to him. Then to the other, "What about you, wizard, seer, thaumaturge? What do you see with your sorcerer's sight?" She joined with the man Rukh in a ratchety roar of laughter, but it ended when she saw that the tall man was still staring at the unicorn. "Answer me, you juggler!" she snarled, but the tall man did not turn his head. The old woman turned it for him, reaching out a crablike hand to yank his chin around. His eyes fell before her yellow stare.

"A horse," he muttered. "A white mare."

Mommy Fortuna looked at him for a long time. "You're a fool too, magician," she snickered at last, "but a worse fool than Rukh, and a more dangerous one. He lies only out of greed, but you lie out of fear. Or could it be kindness?" The man said nothing, and Mommy Fortuna laughed by herself.

"All right," she said. "It's a white mare. I want her for the Carnival. The ninth cage is empty."

"I'll need rope," Rukh said. He was about to turn away, but the old woman stopped him.

"The only rope that could hold her," she told him, "would be the cord with which the old gods bound the Fenris-wolf. That one was made of fishes' breath, bird spittle, a woman's beard, the miaowing of a cat, the sinews of a bear, and one thing more. I remember—mountain roots. Having none of these elements, nor dwarfs to weave them for us, we'll have to do the best we can with iron bars. I'll put a sleep on her, thus," and Mommy Fortuna's hands knitted the night air while she grumbled a few unpleasant words in her throat. There was a smell of lightning about the unicorn when the old woman had finished her spell.

"Now cage her," she said to the two men. "She'll sleep till sunrise, whatever racket you make—unless, in your accustomed stupidity, you touch her with your hands. Take the ninth cage to pieces and build it around her, but beware! The hand that so much as brushes her mane turns instantly to the donkey's hoof it deserves to be." Again she gazed mockingly at the tall, thin man. "Your little tricks would be even harder for you than they already are, wizard," she said, wheezing. "Get to work. There's not much dark left."

When she was well out of earshot, sliding back into the shadow of her wagon as though she had just come out to mark the hour, the man named Rukh spat and said curiously, "Now I wonder what's worrying the old squid. What would it matter if we touched the beast?"

The magician answered him in a voice almost too soft to be heard. "The touch of a human hand would wake her out of the deepest sleep the devil himself could lay on her. And Mommy Fortuna's no devil."

"She'd like us to think so," the dark man sneered. "Donkey hoofs! Gahhh!" But he thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "Why would the spell be broken? It's just an old white mare."

But the magician was walking away toward the last of the black wagons. "Hurry," he called over his shoulder. "It will be day soon."

It took them the rest of the night to pull down the ninth cage, bars and floor and roof and then to put it back together around the sleeping unicorn. Rukh was tugging at the door to make sure that it was securely locked, when the gray trees in the east boiled over and the unicorn opened her eyes. The two men slipped hurriedly away, but the tall magician looked back in time to see the unicorn rise to her feet and stare at the iron bars, her low head swaying like the head of an old white horse.

II

The nine black wagons of the Midnight Carnival seemed smaller by daylight and not menacing at all, but flimsy and fragile as dead leaves. Their draperies were gone, and they were now adorned with sad black banners cut from blankets, and stubby black ribbons that twitched in the breeze. They were arranged strangely in a scrubby field; a pentacle of cages enclosing a triangle, and Mommy Fortuna's wagon lumping in the center. This cage alone retained its black veil, concealing whatever it contained. Mommy Fortuna was nowhere to be seen.

The man named Rukh was leading a straggling crowd of country folk slowly from one cage to the next, commenting somberly on the beasts within. "This here's the manticore. Man's head, lion's body, tail of a scorpion. Captured at midnight, eating werewolves to sweeten its breath. Creatures of night, brought to light. Here's the dragon. Breathes fire now and then—usually at people who poke it, little boy. Its inside is an inferno, but its skin is so cold it burns. The dragon speaks seventeen languages badly, and is subject to gout. The satyr. Ladies keep back. A real troublemaker. Captured under curious circumstances revealed to gentlemen only, for a token fee after the show. Creatures of night." Standing by the unicorn's cage, which was one of the inner three, the tall magician watched the procession proceeding around the pentacle. "I shouldn't be here," he said to the unicorn. "The old woman warned me to stay away from you."

He chuckled pleasantly. "She has mocked me from the day I joined her, but I have made her nervous all that time."

The unicorn hardly heard him. She turned and turned in her prison, her body shrinking from the touch of the iron bars all around her. No creature of man's night loves cold iron, and while the unicorn could endure its presence, the murderous smell of it seemed to turn her bones to sand and her blood to rain. The bars of her cage must have had some sort of spell on them, for they never stopped whispering evilly to one another in clawed, pattering voices. The heavy lock giggled and whined like a mad monkey.

"Tell me what you see," said the magician, as Mommy Fortuna had said it to him. "Look at your fellow legends and tell me what you see."

Rukh's iron voice came clanging through the wan afternoon. "Gatekeeper of the underworld. Three heads and a healthy coat of vipers, as you can see. Last seen aboveground in the time of Hercules, who dragged him up under one arm. But we lured him to light again with promises of a better life. Cerberus. Look at those six cheated red eyes. You may look into them again one day. This way to the Midgard Serpent. This way."

The unicorn stared through the bars at the animal in the cage. Her eyes were wide with disbelief. "It's only a dog," she whispered. "It's a hungry, unhappy dog with only one head and hardly any coat at all, the poor thing. How could they ever take it for Cerberus? Are they all blind?"

"Look again," the magician said.

"And the satyr," the unicorn continued. "The satyr is an ape, an old ape with a twisted foot. The dragon is a crocodile, much more likely to breathe fish than fire. And the great manticore is a lion—a perfectly good lion, but no more monstrous than the others. I don't understand."

"It's got the whole world in its coils," Rukh was droning. And once more the magician said, "Look again."

Then, as though her eyes were getting used to darkness, the unicorn began to perceive a second figure in each cage. They loomed hugely over the captives of the Midnight Carnival, and yet they were joined to them: stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth. So there was a manticore—famine-eyed, slobber-mouthed, roaring, curving his deadly tail over his back until the poison spine lolled and nodded just above his ear—and there was a lion too, tiny and absurd by comparison. Yet they were the same creature. The unicorn stamped in wonder.

It was so in all the other cages. The shadow-dragon opened his mouth and hissed harmless fire to make the gapers gasp and cringe, while Hell's snake-furred watchdog howled triple dooms and devastations down on his betrayers, and the satyr limped leering to the bars and beckoned young girls to impossible delights, right there in public. As for the crocodile, the ape, and the sad dog, they faded steadily before the marvelous phantoms until they were only shadows themselves, even to the unicorn's undeceived eyes. "This is a strange sorcery," she said softly. "There's more meaning than magic to this."

The magician laughed with pleasure and great relief. "Well said, well said indeed. I know the old horror wouldn't dazzle *you* with her twopenny spells." His voice grew hard and secret. "She's made her third mistake now," he said, "and that's at least two too many for a tired old trickster like herself. The time draws near."

"The time draws near," Rukh was telling the crowd, as though he had overheard the magician. "Ragnarok. On that day, when the gods fall, the Serpent of the Midgard will spit a storm of venom at great Thor himself, till he tumbles over like a poisoned fly. And so he waits for Judgment Day, and dreams about the part he'll play. It may be so—I couldn't say. Creatures of night, brought to light."

The cage was filled with snake. There was no head to it, and no tail—nothing but a wave of tarnished darkness rolling from one end of the cage to the other, leaving no room for anything but its own thunderous breathing. Only the unicorn saw, coiled in a corner, a baleful boa; brooding, perhaps, over its own Judgment on the Midnight Carnival. But it was tiny and dim as the ghost of a worm in the Serpent's shadow.

A wondering gawk stuck up his hand and demanded of Rukh, "If this big snake do be coiled around the world, as you say, how come you to be having a piece of it in your wagon? And if it can shatter the sea just by stretching of itself, what's to keep it from crawling off wearing your whole show like a necklace?" There were murmurs of agreement, and some of the murmurers began to back warily away.

"I'm glad you asked me that, friend," Rukh said with a scowl. "It just so happens that the Midgard Serpent exists in like another space from ours, another dimension. Normally, therefore, he's invisible, but dragged into our world—as Thor hooked him once—he shows clear as lightning, which also visits us from somewhere else, where it might look quite different. And naturally he might turn nasty if he knew that a bit of his tummy slack was on view daily and Sundays in Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival. But he don't know. He's got other things to think about than what becomes of his belly button, and we take our chances—as do you all—on his continued tranquility." He rolled and stretched the last word like dough, and his hearers laughed carefully.

"Spells of seeming," the unicorn said. "She cannot make things."

"Nor truly change them," added the magician. "Her shabby skill lies in disguise. And even that knack would be beyond her, if it weren't for the eagerness of those gulls, those marks, to believe whatever comes easiest. She can't turn cream into butter, but she can give a lion the semblance of a manticore to eyes that want to see a manticore there—eyes that would take a real manticore for a lion, a dragon for a lizard, and the Midgard Serpent for an earthquake. And a unicorn for a white mare."

The unicorn halted in her slow, desperate round of the cage, realizing for the first time that the magician understood her speech. He smiled, and she saw that his face was frighteningly young for a grown man—untraveled by time, unvisited by grief or wisdom. "I know you," he said.

The bars whispered wickedly between them. Rukh was leading the crowd to the inner cages now. The unicorn asked the tall man, "Who are you?"

"I am called Schmendrick the Magician," he answered. "You won't have heard of me."

The unicorn came very near to explaining that it was hardly for her to have heard of one wizard or another, but something sad and valiant in his voice kept her from it. The magician said, "I entertain the sightseers as they gather for the show. Miniature magic, sleight of hand—flowers to flags and flags to fish, all accompanied by persuasive patter and a suggestion that I could work more ominous wonders if I chose. It's not much of a job, but I've had worse, and I'll have better one day. This is not the end."

But the sound of his voice made the unicorn feel as though she were trapped forever, and once more she began pacing her cage, moving to keep her heart from bursting with the terror of being closed in. Rukh was standing before a cage that contained nothing but a small brown spider weaving a modest web across the bars. "Arachne of Lydia," he told the crowd. "Guaranteed the greatest weaver in the world—her fate's the proof of it. She had the bad luck to defeat the goddess Athena in a weaving contest. Athena was a sore loser, and Arachne is now a spider, creating only for Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival, by special arrangement. Warp of snow and woof of flame, and never any two the same. Arachne."

Strung on the loom of iron bars, the web was very simple and almost colorless, except for an occasional rainbow shiver when the spider scuttled out on it to put a thread right. But it drew the onlookers' eyes—and the unicorn's eyes as well—back and forth and steadily deeper, until they seemed to be looking down into great rifts in the world, black fissures that widened remorselessly and yet would not fall into pieces as long as Arachne's web held the world together. The unicorn shook herself free with a sigh, and saw the real web again. It was very simple, and almost colorless.

"It isn't like the others," she said.

"No," Schmendrick agreed grudgingly. "But there's no credit due to Mommy Fortuna for that. You see, the spider believes. She sees those cat's-cradles herself and thinks them her own work. Belief makes all the difference to magic like Mommy Fortuna's. Why, if that troop of witlings withdrew their wonder, there'd be nothing left of all her witchery but the sound of a spider weeping. And no one would hear it."

The unicorn did not want to look into the web again. She glanced at the cage closest to her own, and suddenly felt the breath in her body turning to cold iron. There sat on an oaken perch a creature with the body of a great bronze bird and a hag's face, clenched and deadly as the talons with which she gripped the wood. She had the shaggy round ears of a bear; but down her scaly shoulders, mingling with the bright knives of her plumage, there fell hair the color of moonlight, thick and youthful around the hating human face. She glittered, but to look at her was to feel the light going out of the sky. Catching sight of the unicorn, she made a queer sound like a hiss and a chuckle together.

The unicorn said quietly, "This one is real. This is the harpy Celaeno."

Schmendrick's face had gone the color of oatmeal. "The old woman caught her by chance," he whispered, "asleep, as she took you. But it was an ill fortune, and they both know it. Mommy Fortuna's craft is just sure enough to hold the monster, but its mere presence is wearing all her spells so thin that in a little time she won't have power enough left to fry an egg. She should never have done it, never meddled with a real harpy, a real unicorn. The truth melts her magic, always, but she cannot keep from trying to make it serve her. But this time—"

"Sister of the rainbow, believe it or not," they heard Rukh braying to the awed onlookers. "Her name means 'the Dark One,' the one whose wings blacken the sky before a storm. She and her two sweet sisters nearly starved the king Phineus to death by snatching and befouling his food before he could eat it. But the sons of the North Wind made them quit that, didn't they, my beauty?" The harpy made no sound, and Rukh grinned like a cage himself.

"She put up a fiercer fight than all the others put together," he went on. "It was like trying to bind all hell with a hair, but Mommy Fortuna's powers are great enough even for that. Creatures of night, brought to light. Polly want a cracker?" Few in the crowd laughed. The harpy's talons tightened on her perch until the wood cried out.

"You'll need to be free when she frees herself," the magician said. "She mustn't catch you caged."

"I dare not touch the iron," the unicorn replied. "My horn could open the lock, but I cannot reach it. I cannot get out." She was trembling with horror of the harpy, but her voice was quite calm.

Schmendrick the Magician drew himself up several inches taller than the unicorn would have thought possible. "Fear nothing," he began grandly. "For all my air of mystery, I have a feeling heart." But he was interrupted by the approach of Rukh and his followers, grown quieter than the grubby gang who had giggled at the manticore. The magician fled, calling back softly, "Don't be afraid, Schmendrick is with you. Do nothing till you hear from me!" His voice drifted to the unicorn, so faint and lonely that she was not sure whether she actually heard it or only felt it brush against her.

It was growing dark. The crowd stood in front of her cage, peering in at her with a strange shyness. Rukh said, "The unicorn," and stepped aside.

She heard hearts bounce, tears brewing, and breath going backward, but nobody said a word. By the sorrow and loss and sweetness in their faces she knew that they recognized her, and she accepted their hunger as her homage. She thought of the hunter's great-grandmother, and wondered what it must be like to grow old, and to cry.

"Most shows," said Rukh after a time, "would end here, for what could they possibly present after a genuine unicorn? But Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival holds one more mystery yet—a demon more destructive than the dragon, more monstrous than the manticore, more hideous than the harpy, and certainly more universal than the unicorn." He waved his hand toward the last wagon and the black hangings began to wriggle open, though there was no one pulling them. "Behold her!" Rukh cried. "Behold the last, the Very End! Behold Elli!"

Inside the cage, it was darker than the evening, and cold stirred behind the bars like a live thing. Something moved in the cold, and the unicorn saw Elli—an old, bony, ragged woman who crouched in the cage rocking and warming herself before a fire that was not there. She looked so frail that the weight of the darkness should have crushed her, and so helpless and alone that the watchers should have rushed forward in pity to free her. Instead, they began to back silently away, for all the world as though Elli were stalking them. But she was not even looking at them. She sat in the dark and creaked a song to herself in a voice that sounded like a saw going through a tree, and like a tree getting ready to fall.

"What is plucked will grow again,
What is slain lives on,
What is stolen will remain—
What is gone is gone."

"She doesn't look like much, does she?" Rukh asked. "But no hero can stand before her, no god can wrestle her down, no magic can keep her out—or in, for she's no prisoner of ours. Even while we exhibit her here, she is walking among you, touching and taking. For Elli is Old Age."

The cold of the cage reached out to the unicorn, and wherever it touched her she grew lame and feeble. She felt herself withering, loosening, felt her beauty leaving her with her breath. Ugliness swung from her mane, dragged down her head, stripped her tail, gaunted her body, ate up her coat, and ravaged her mind with remembrance of what she had once been. Somewhere nearby, the harpy made her low, eager sound, but the unicorn would gladly have huddled in the shadow of her bronze wings to hide from this last demon. Elli's song sawed away at her heart.

"What is sea-born dies on land,
Soft is trod upon.
What is given burns the hand—
What is gone is gone."

The show was over. The crowd was stealing away, no one alone but in couples and fews and severals, strangers holding strangers' hands, looking back often to see if Elli were following. Rukh called plaintively, "Won't the gentlemen wait to hear the story about the satyr?" and sent a sour yowl of laughter chasing their slow flight. "Creatures of night, brought to light!" They struggled through the stiffening air, past the unicorn's cage, and on away, with Rukh's laughter yapping them home, and Elli still singing.

This is illusion, the unicorn told herself. This is illusion—and somehow raised a head heavy with death to stare deep into the dark of the last cage and see, not Old Age, but Mommy Fortuna herself, stretching and snickering and clambering to the ground with her old eerie ease. And the unicorn knew then that she had not become mortal and ugly at all, but she did not feel beautiful again. Perhaps that was illusion too, she thought wearily.

"I enjoyed that," Mommy Fortuna said to Rukh. "I always do. I guess I'm just stagestruck at heart."

"You better check on that damn harpy," Rukh said. "I could *feel* her working loose this time. It was like I was a rope holding her, and she was untying me." He shuddered and lowered his voice. "Get rid of her," he said hoarsely. "Before she scatters us across the sky like bloody clouds. She thinks about it all the time. I can feel her thinking about it."

"Fool, be still!" The witch's own voice was fierce with fear. "I can turn her into wind if she escapes, or into snow, or into seven notes of music. But I choose to keep her. No other witch in the world holds a harpy captive, and none ever will. I would keep her if I could do it only by feeding her a piece of your liver every day."

"Oh, that's nice," Rukh said. He sidled away from her. "What if she only wanted your liver?" he demanded. "What would you do then?"

"Feed her yours anyway," Mommy Fortuna said. "She wouldn't know the difference. Harpies aren't bright."

Alone in the moonlight, the old woman glided from cage to cage, rattling locks and prodding her enchantments as a housewife squeezes melons in the market. When she came to the harpy's cage the monster made a sound as shrill as a spear, and spread the horrid glory of its wings. For a moment it seemed to the unicorn that the bars of the cage began to wriggle and run like rain; but Mommy Fortuna crackled her twiggy fingers and the bars were iron again, and the harpy sank down on its perch, waiting.

"Not yet," the witch said. "Not yet." They stared at each other with the same eyes. Mommy Fortuna said, "You're mine. If you kill me, you're mine." The harpy did not move, but a cloud put out the moon.

"Not yet," Mommy Fortuna said, and she turned toward the unicorn's cage. "Well," she said in her sweet, smoky voice. "I had you frightened for a little while, didn't I?" She laughed with a sound like snakes hurrying through mud, and strolled closer.

"Whatever your friend the magician may say," she went on, "I must have some small art after all. To trick a unicorn into believing herself old and foul—that takes a certain skill, I'd say. And is it a twopenny spell that holds the Dark One prisoner? No other till I—"

The unicorn replied, "Do not boast, old woman. Your death sits in that cage and hears you."

"Yes," Mommy Fortuna said calmly. "But at least I know where it is. You were out on the road hunting for your own death." She laughed again. "And I know where that one is, too. But I spared you the finding of it, and you should be grateful for that."

Forgetting where she was, the unicorn pressed forward against the bars. They hurt her, but she did not draw back. "The Red Bull," she said. "Where can I find the Red Bull?"

Mommy Fortuna stepped very close to the cage. "The Red Bull of King Haggard," she muttered. "So you know of the Bull." She showed two of her teeth. "Well, he'll not have you," she said. "You belong to me."

The unicorn shook her head. "You know better," she answered gently. "Free the harpy, while there is time, and set me free as well. Keep your poor shadows, if you will, but let us go."

The witch's stagnant eyes blazed up so savagely bright that a ragged company of luna moths, off to a night's revel, fluttered straight into them, and sizzled into snowy ashes. "I'd quit show business first," she snarled. "Trudging through eternity, hauling my homemade horrors—do you think *that* was my dream when I was young and evil? Do you think I chose this meager magic, sprung of stupidity, because I never knew the true witchery? I play tricks with dogs and monkeys because I cannot touch the grass, but I know the difference. And now you ask me to give up the sight of you, the presence of your power. I told Rukh I'd feed his liver to the harpy if I had to, and so I would. And to keep you I'd take your friend Schmendrick, and I'd—" She raged herself to gibberish, and at last to silence.

"Speaking of livers," the unicorn said. "Real magic can never be made by offering up someone else's liver. You must tear out your own, and not expect to get it back. The true witches know that."

A few grains of sand rustled down Mommy Fortuna's cheek as she stared at the unicorn. All witches weep like that. She turned and walked swiftly toward her wagon, but suddenly she turned again and grinned her rubbly grin. "But I tricked you twice, anyway," she said. "Did you really think that those gogglers knew you for yourself without any help from me? No, I had to give you an aspect they could understand, and a horn they could see. These days, it takes a cheap carnival witch to make folk recognize a real unicorn. You'd do much better to stay with me and be false, for in this whole world only the Red Bull will know you when he sees you." She disappeared into her wagon, and the harpy let the moon come out again.

III

Schmendrick came back a little before dawn, slipping between the cages as silently as water. Only the harpy made a sound as he went by. "I couldn't get away any sooner," he told the unicorn. "She's set Rukh to watching me, and he hardly ever sleeps. But I asked him a riddle, and it always takes him all night to solve riddles. Next time, I'll tell him a joke and keep him busy for a week."

The unicorn was gray and still. "There is magic on me," she said. "Why did you not tell me?"

"I thought you knew," the magician answered gently. "After all, didn't you wonder how it could be that they recognized you?" Then he smiled, which made him look a little older. "No, of course not. You never would wonder about that."

"There has never been a spell on me before," the unicorn said. She shivered long and deep. "There has never been a world in which I was not known."

"I know exactly how you feel," Schmendrick said eagerly. The unicorn looked at him out of dark, endless eyes, and he smiled nervously and looked at his hands. "It's a rare man who is taken for what he truly is," he said. "There is much misjudgment in the world. Now I knew you for a unicorn when I first saw you, and I know that I am your friend. Yet you take me for a clown, or a clod, or a betrayer, and so must I be if you see me so. The magic on you is only magic and will vanish as soon as you are free, but the enchantment of error that you put on me I must wear forever in your eyes. We are not always what we seem, and hardly ever what we dream. Still I have read, or heard it sung, that unicorns when time was young, could tell the difference 'twixt the two—the false shining and the true, the lips' laugh and the heart's rue." His quiet voice lifted as the sky grew lighter, and for a moment the unicorn could not hear the bars whining, or the soft ringing of the harpy's wings.

"I think you are my friend," she said. "Will you help me?"

"If not you, no one," the magician answered. "You are my last chance."

One by one, the sad beasts of the Midnight Carnival came whimpering, sneezing, and shuddering awake. One had been dreaming of rocks and bugs and tender leaves; another of bounding through high, hot grass; a third of mud and blood. And one had dreamed of a hand scratching the lonely place behind its ears. Only the harpy had not slept, and now she sat staring into the sun without blinking. Schmendrick said, "If she frees herself first, we are lost."

They heard Rukh's voice nearby—that voice always sounded nearby—calling, "Schmendrick! Hey, Schmendrick, I got it! It's a coffeepot, right?" The magician began to move slowly away. "Tonight," he murmured to the unicorn. "Trust me till dawn." And was gone with a flap and a scramble, seeming as before to leave part of himself behind. Rukh loped by the cage a moment later, all deadly economy. Hidden in her black wagon, Mommy Fortuna grumbled Elli's song to herself.

"Here is there, and high is low;
All may be undone.
What is true, no two men know—
What is gone is gone."

Soon a new catch of spectators began to come sauntering up to see the show. Rukh called them in, crying, "Creatures of night!" like an iron parrot, and Schmendrick stood on a box and did tricks. The unicorn watched him with great interest and a growing uncertainty, not of his heart, but of his craft. He made an entire sow out of a sow's ear; turned a sermon into a stone, a glass of water into a handful of water, a five of spades into a twelve of spades, and a rabbit into a goldfish that drowned. Each time he conjured up confusion, he glanced quickly at the unicorn with eyes that said, "Oh, but *you* know what I really did." Once he changed a dead rose into a seed. The unicorn liked that, even though it did turn out to be a radish seed.

The show began again. Once more Rukh led the crowd from one of Mommy Fortuna's poor fables to another. The dragon blazed, Cerberus howled for Hell to come and help him, and the satyr tempted women until they wept. They squinted and pointed at the manticore's yellow tusks and swollen sting; grew still at the thought of the Midgard Serpent; and wondered at Arachne's new web, which was like a fisherman's net with the dripping moon in it. Each of them took it for a real web, but only the spider believed that it held the real moon.

This time, Rukh did not tell the story of King Phineus and the Argonauts; indeed, he hurried his sightseers past the harpy's cage as quickly as he could, gabbling only her name and the meaning of it. The harpy smiled. Nobody saw her smile except the unicorn, and she wished that she had chanced to be looking somewhere else at the time.

When they stood in front of her cage, gazing silently in at her, the unicorn thought bitterly, Their eyes are so sad. How much sadder would they be, I wonder, if the spell that disguises me dissolved and they were left staring at a common white mare? The witch is right—not one would know me. But then a soft voice, rather like the voice of Schmendrick the Magician, said inside her, But their eyes are so sad.

And when Rukh shrieked, "Behold the Very End!" and the black hangings slithered back to reveal Elli, mumbling in the cold and the darkness, the unicorn felt the same helpless fear of growing old that set the crowd to flight, even though she knew that it was only Mommy Fortuna in the cage. She thought, The witch knows more than she knows she knows.

Night came quickly, perhaps because the harpy hurried it on. The sun sank into dirty clouds like a stone into the sea, and with about as much chance of rising again, and there was no moon, or any stars. Mommy Fortuna made her gliding rounds of the cages. The harpy did not move when she drew near, and that made the old woman stand and stare at her for a long while.

"Not yet," she muttered at last, "not yet," but her voice was weary and doubtful. She peered briefly at the unicorn, her eyes a stir of yellow in the greasy gloom. "Well, one day more," she said in a crackling sigh, and turned away again.

There was no sound in the Carnival after she was gone. All the beasts were asleep, save the spider, who wove, and the harpy, who waited. Yet the night creaked tighter and tighter, until the unicorn expected it to split wide open, ripping a seam down the sky, to reveal— More bars, she thought. Where is the magician?

At last he came hurrying through the silence, spinning and dancing like a cat in the cold, stumbling over shadows. When he reached the unicorn's cage, he made a joyful bow to her and said proudly, "Schmendrick is with you." In the cage nearest to hers, the unicorn heard the edged shivering of bronze.

"I think we have very little time," she said. "Can you truly set me free?"

The tall man smiled, and even his pale, solemn fingers grew merry. "I told you that the witch has made three great mistakes. Your capture was the last, and the taking of the harpy the second, because you are both real, and Mommy Fortuna can no more make you hers than she can make the winter a day longer. But to take me for a mountebank like herself—that was her first and fatal folly. For I too am real.

I am Schmendrick the Magician, the last of the red-hot swamis, and I am older than I look."

"Where is the other?" the unicorn asked.

Schmendrick was pushing back his sleeves. "Don't worry about Rukh. I asked him another riddle, one that has no answer. He may never move again."

He spoke three angled words and snapped his fingers. The cage disappeared. The unicorn found herself standing in a grove of trees—orange and lemon, pear and pomegranate, almond and acacia—with soft spring earth under her feet, and the sky growing over her. Her heart turned light as smoke, and she gathered up the strength of her body for a great bound into the sweet night. But she let the leap drift out of her, untaken, for she knew, although she could not see them, that the bars were still there. She was too old not to know.

"I'm sorry," Schmendrick said, somewhere in the dark. "I would have liked it to be that spell that freed you."

Now he sang something cold and low, and the strange trees blew away like dandelion down. "This is a surer spell," he said. "The bars are now as brittle as old cheese, which I crumble and scatter, so." Then he gasped and snatched his hands away. Each long finger was dripping blood.

"I must have gotten the accent wrong," he said hoarsely. He hid his hands in his cloak and tried to make his voice light. "It comes and goes."

A scratching of flinty phrases this time, and Schmendrick's bloody hands flickering across the sky. Something gray and grinning, something like a bear, but bigger than a bear, something that chuckled muddily, came limping from somewhere, eager to crack the cage like a nut and pick out bits of the unicorn's flesh with its claws. Schmendrick ordered it back into the night, but it wouldn't go.

The unicorn backed into a corner and lowered her head; but the harpy stirred softly in her cage, ringing, and the gray shape turned what must have been its head and saw her. It made a foggy, globbering sound of terror, and was gone.

The magician cursed and shivered. He said, "I called him up one other time, long ago. I couldn't handle him then either. Now we owe our lives to the harpy, and she may yet come to call for them before the sun rises." He stood silent, twisting his wounded fingers, waiting for the unicorn to speak. "I'll try once more," he said finally. "Shall I try once more?"

The unicorn thought that she could still see the night boiling where the gray thing had been. "Yes," she said.

Schmendrick took a deep breath, spat three times, and spoke words that sounded like bells ringing under the sea. He scattered a handful of powder over the spittle, and smiled triumphantly as it puffed up in a single silent flash of green. When the light had faded, he said three more words. They were like the noise bees might make buzzing on the moon.

The cage began to grow smaller. The unicorn could not see the bars moving, but each time Schmendrick said "Ah, *no*!" she had less room in which to stand. Already she could not turn around. The bars were drawing in, pitiless as the tide or the morning, and they would shear through her until they surrounded her heart, which they would keep a prisoner forever. She had not cried out when the creature Schmendrick had summoned came, grinning, toward her, but now she made a sound. It was small and despairing, but not yet yielding.

Schmendrick stopped the bars, though she never knew how. If he spoke any magic, she had not heard it; but the cage stopped shrinking a breath before the bars touched her body. She could feel them all the same, each one like a little cold wind, miaowing with hunger. But they could not reach her.

The magician's arms fell to his sides. "I dare no more," he said heavily. "The next time, I might not be able . . ." His voice trailed miserably away, and his eyes were as defeated as his hands. "The witch made no mistake in me," he said.

"Try again," the unicorn said. "You are my friend. Try again."

But Schmendrick, smiling bitterly, was fumbling through his pockets in search of something that clicked and clinked. "I knew it would come to this," he muttered. "I dreamed it differently, but I knew." He brought out a ring from which dangled several rusty keys. "You deserve the services of a great wizard," he said to the unicorn, "but I'm afraid you'll have to be glad of the aid of a second-rate pickpocket. Unicorns know nought of need, or shame, or doubt, or debt—but mortals, as you may have noticed, take what they can get. And Rukh can only concentrate on one thing at a time."

The unicorn was suddenly aware that every animal in the Midnight Carnival was awake, making no sound, but watching her. In the next cage, the harpy began to stamp slowly from one foot to the other. "Hurry," the unicorn said. "Hurry."

Schmendrick was already fitting a key into the snickering lock. At his first attempt, which failed, the lock fell silent, but when he tried another key it cried out loudly, "Ho-ho, some magician! Some magician!" It had Mommy Fortuna's voice.

"Ah, turn blue," the magician mumbled, but the unicorn could feel him blushing. He twisted the key, and the lock snapped open with one last grunt of contempt. Schmendrick swung the cage door wide and said softly, "Step down, lady. You are free."

The unicorn stepped lightly to the ground, and Schmendrick the Magician drew back in sudden wonder. "Oh," he whispered. "It was different when there were bars between us. You look smaller, and not as—oh. Oh my."

She was home in her forest, which was black and wet and ruined because she had been gone so long. Someone was calling to her from a long way off but she was home, warming the trees and waking the grass.

Then she heard Rukh's voice, like a boat bottom gritting on pebbles. "Okay, Schmendrick, I give up. Why *is* a raven like a writing desk?" The unicorn moved away into deepest shadow, and Rukh saw only the magician and the empty, dwindled cage. His hand jumped to his pocket and came away again. "Why, you thin thief," he said, grinning iron. "She'll string you on barbed wire to make a necklace for the harpy." He turned then and headed straight for Mommy Fortuna's wagon.

"Run," the magician said. He made a frantic, foolish, flying leap and landed on Rukh's back, hugging the dark man dumb and blind with his long arms. They fell together, and Schmendrick scrambled up first, his knees nailing Rukh's shoulders to the earth. "Barbed wire," he gasped. "You pile of stones, you waste, you desolation, I'll stuff you with misery till it comes out of your eyes. I'll change your heart into green grass, and all you love into a sheep. I'll turn you into a bad poet with dreams. I'll set all your toenails growing inward. You mess with me."

Rukh shook his head and sat up, hurling Schmendrick ten feet away. "What are you talking about?" He chuckled. "You can't turn cream into butter." The magician was getting to his feet, but Rukh pushed his back down and sat on him. "I never did like you," he said pleasantly. "You give yourself airs, and you're not very strong." Heavy as night, his hands closed on the magician's throat.

The unicorn did not see. She was out at the farthest cage, where the manticore growled and whimpered and lay flat. She touched the point of her horn to the lock, and was gone to the dragon's cage without looking back. One after another, she set them all free—the satyr, Cerberus, the Midgard Serpent. Their enchantments vanished as they felt their freedom, and they leaped and lumbered and slithered away into the night, once more a lion, an ape, a snake, a crocodile, a joyous dog. None of them thanked the unicorn, and she did not watch them go.

Only the spider paid no mind when the unicorn called softly to her through the open door. Arachne was busy with a web which looked to her as though the Milky Way had begun to fall like snow. The unicorn whispered, "Weaver, freedom is better, freedom is better," but the spider fled unhearing up and down her iron loom. She never stopped for a moment, even when the unicorn cried, "It's really very attractive, Arachne, but it's not art." The new web drifted down the bars like snow.

Then the wind began. The spiderweb blew across the unicorn's eyes and disappeared. The harpy had begun to beat her wings, calling her power in, as a crouching wave draws sand and water roaring down the beach. A bloodshot moon burst out of the clouds, and the unicorn saw her—swollen gold, her streaming hair kindling, the cold, slow wings shaking the cage. The harpy was laughing.

In the shadow of the unicorn's cage, Rukh and Schmendrick were on their knees. The magician was clutching the heavy ring of keys, and Rukh was rubbing his head and blinking. Their faces were blind with terror as they stared at the rising harpy, and they leaned together in the wind. It blew them against one another, and their bones rang.

The unicorn began to walk toward the harpy's cage. Schmendrick the Magician, tiny and pale, kept opening and closing his mouth at her, and she knew what he was shrieking, though she could not hear him. "She will kill you, she will kill you! Run, you fool, while she's still a prisoner! She will kill you if you set her free!" But the unicorn walked on, following the light of her horn, until she stood before Celaeno, the Dark One.

For an instant the icy wings hung silent in the air, like clouds, and the harpy's old yellow eyes sank into the unicorn's heart and drew her close. "I will kill you if you set me free," the eyes said. "Set me free."

The unicorn lowered her head until her horn touched the lock of the harpy's cage. The door did not swing open, and the iron bars did not thaw into starlight. But the harpy lifted her wings, and the four sides of the cage fell slowly away and down, like the petals of some great flower waking at night. And out of the wreckage the harpy bloomed, terrible and free, screaming, her hair swinging like a sword. The moon withered and fled.

The unicorn heard herself cry out, not in terror but in wonder, "Oh, you are like me!" She reared joyously to meet the harpy's stoop, and her horn leaped up into the wicked wind. The harpy struck once, missed, and swung away, her wings clanging and her breath warm and stinking. She burned overhead, and the unicorn saw herself reflected on the harpy's bronze breast and felt the monster shining from her own body. So they circled one another like a double star, and under the shrunken sky there was nothing real but the two of them. The harpy laughed with delight, and her eyes turned the color of honey. The unicorn knew that she was going to strike again.

The harpy folded her wings and fell like a star—not at the unicorn, but beyond her, passing so close that a single feather drew blood from the unicorn's shoulder; bright claws reaching for the heart of Mommy Fortuna, who was stretching out her own sharp hands as though to welcome the harpy home. "Not alone!" the witch howled triumphantly at both of them. "You never could have freed yourselves alone! I held you!" Then the harpy reached her, and she broke like a dead stick and fell. The harpy crouched on her body, hiding it from sight, and the bronze wings turned red.

The unicorn turned away. Close by, she heard a child's voice telling her that she must run, she must run. It was the magician. His eyes were huge and empty, and his face—always too young—was collapsing into childhood as the unicorn looked at him. "No," she said. "Come with me."

The harpy made a thick, happy sound that melted the magician's knees. But the unicorn said again, "Come with me," and together they walked away from the Midnight Carnival. The moon was gone, but to the magician's eyes the unicorn was the moon, cold and white and very old, lighting his way to safety, or to madness. He followed her, never once looking back, even when he heard the desperate scrambling and skidding of heavy feet, the boom of bronze wings, and Rukh's interrupted scream.

"He ran," the unicorn said. "You must never run from anything immortal. It attracts their attention." Her voice was gentle, and without pity. "Never run," she said. "Walk slowly, and pretend to be thinking of something else. Sing a song, say a poem, do your tricks, but walk slowly and she may not follow. Walk very slowly, magician."

So they fled across the night together, step by step, the tall man in black and the horned white beast. The magician crept as close to the unicorn's light as he dared, for beyond it moved hungry shadows, the shadows of the sounds that the harpy made as she destroyed the little there was to destroy of the Midnight Carnival. But another sound followed them long after these had faded, followed them into morning on a strange road—the tiny, dry sound of a spider weeping.

IV

Like a newborn child, the magician wept for a long time before he could speak. "The poor old woman," he whispered at last. The unicorn said nothing, and Schmendrick raised his head and stared at her in a strange way. A gray morning rain was beginning to fall, and she shone through it like a dolphin. "No," she said, answering his eyes. "I can never regret."

He was silent, crouched by the road in the rain, drawing his soaked cloak close around his body until he looked like a broken black umbrella. The unicorn waited, feeling the days of her life falling around her with the rain. "I can sorrow," she offered gently, "but it's not the same thing."

When Schmendrick looked at her again he had managed to pull his face together, but it was still struggling to escape from him. "Where will you go now?" he asked. "Where were you going when she took you?"

"I was looking for my people," the unicorn said. "Have you seen them, magician? They are wild and sea-white, like me."

Schmendrick shook his head gravely. "I have never seen anyone like you, not while I was awake. There were supposed to be a few unicorns left when I was a boy, but I knew only one man who had ever seen one. They are surely gone, lady, all but you. When you walk, you make an echo where they used to be."

"No," she said, "for others have seen them." It gladdened her to hear that there had still been unicorns as recently as the magician's childhood. She said "A butterfly told me of the Red Bull, and the Witch spoke of King Haggard. So I am going wherever they are to learn whatever they know. Can you tell me where Haggard is king?"

The magician's face almost got away, but he caught it and began to smile very slowly, as though his mouth had turned to iron. He bent it into the proper shape in time, but it was an iron smile. "I can tell you a poem," he said.

"Where all the hills are lean as knives,
And nothing grows, not leaves nor lives;
Where hearts are sour as boiled beer—
Haggard is the ruler here."

"I will know when I get there, then," she said, thinking that he was mocking her. "Do you know any poems about the Red Bull?"

"There are none," Schmendrick answered. He rose to his feet, pale and smiling. "About King Haggard I know only what I have heard," he said. "He is an old man, stingy as late November, who rules over a barren country by the sea. Some say that the land was green and soft once, before Haggard came, but he touched it and it withered. There is a saying among farmers, when they look on a field lost to fire or locusts or the wind: As 'blighted as Haggard's heart.' They say also that there are no lights in his castle and no fires, and that he sends his men out to steal chickens, and bedsheets, and pies from windowsills. The story has it that the last time King Haggard laughed—"

The unicorn stamped her foot. Schmendrick said, "As for the Red Bull, I know less than I have heard, for I have heard too many tales and each argues with another. The Bull is real, the Bull is a ghost, the Bull is Haggard himself when the sun goes down. The Bull was in the land before Haggard, or it came with him, or it came to him. It protects him from raids and revolutions, and saves him the expense of arming his men. It keeps him a prisoner in his own castle. It is the devil, to whom Haggard has sold his soul. It is the thing he sold his soul to possess. The Bull belongs to Haggard. Haggard belongs to the bull."

The unicorn felt a shiver of sureness spreading through her, widening from the center, like a ripple. In her mind the butterfly piped again, "They passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them and covered their footprints." She saw white forms blowing away in a bellowing wind, and yellow horns shaking. "I will go there," she said. "Magician, I owe you a boon, for you set me free. What would you have of me before I leave you?"

Schmendrick's long eyes were glinting like leaves in the sun. "Take me with you."

She moved away, cool and dancing, and she did not answer. The magician said, "I might be useful. I know the way into Haggard's country, and the languages of the lands between here and there." The unicorn seemed very near to vanishing into the sticky mist, and Schmendrick hurried on. "Besides, no wanderer was ever the worse for a wizard's company, even a unicorn. Remember the tale of the great wizard Nikos. Once, in the woods, he beheld a unicorn sleeping with his head in the lap of a giggling virgin, while three hunters advanced with drawn bows to slay him for his horn. Nikos had only a moment to act. With a word and a wave, he changed the unicorn into a handsome young man, who woke, and seeing the astonished bowmen gaping there, charged upon them and killed them all. His sword was of a twisted, tapering design, and he trampled the bodies when the men were dead."

"And the girl?" the unicorn asked. "Did he kill the girl too?"

"No, he married her. He said she was only an aimless child, angry at her family, and that all she really needed was a good man. Which he was, then and always, for even Nikos could never give him back his first form. He died old and respected—of a surfeit of violets, some say—he never could get enough violets. There were no children."

The story lodged itself somewhere in the unicorn's breath. "The magician did him no service, but great ill," she said softly. "How terrible it would be if all my people had been turned human by well-meaning wizards—exiled, trapped in burning houses. I would sooner find that the Red Bull had killed them all."

"Where you are going now," Schmendrick answered, "few will mean you anything but evil, and a friendly heart—however foolish—may be as welcome as water one day. Take me with you, for laughs, for luck, for the unknown. Take me with you."

The rain faded as he spoke, the sky began to clear, and the wet grass glowed like the inside of a seashell. The unicorn looked away, searching through a fog of kings for one king, and through a snowy glitter of castles and palaces for one built on the shoulders of a bull. "No one has ever traveled with me," she said, "but then no one ever caged me before, or took me for a white mare, or disguised me as myself. Many things seem determined to happen to me for the first time, and your company will surely not be the strangest of them, nor the last. So you may come with me if you like, though I wish you had asked me for some other reward."

Schmendrick smiled sadly. "I thought about it." He looked at his fingers, and the unicorn saw the halfmoon marks where the bars had bitten him. "But you could never have granted my true wish."

There it is, the unicorn thought, feeling the first spidery touch of sorrow on the inside of her skin. That is how it will be to travel with a mortal, all the time. "No," she replied. "I cannot turn you into something you are not, no more than the witch could. I cannot turn you into a true magician."

"I didn't think so," Schmendrick said. "It's all right. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worrying about it," the unicorn said.

A blue jay swooped low over them on that first day of their journey, said, "Well, I'll be a squab under glass," and flapped straight home to tell his wife about it. She was sitting on the nest, singing to their children in a dreary drone.

"Spiders and sowbugs and beetles and crickets,
Slugs from the roses and ticks from the thickets,
Grasshoppers, snails, and a quail's egg or two—
All to be regurgitated for you.
Lullaby, lullaby, swindles and schemes,
Flying's not near as much fun as it seems."

"Saw a unicorn today," the blue jay said as he lit.

"You didn't see any supper, I notice," his wife replied coldly. "I hate a man who talks with his mouth empty."

"Baby, a unicorn!" The jay abandoned his casual air and hopped up and down on the branch. "I haven't seen one of those since the time—"

"You've never seen one," she said. "This is me, remember? I know what you've seen in your life, and what you haven't."

The jay paid no attention. "There was a strange-looking party in black with her," he rattled. "They were going over Cat Mountain. I wonder if they were heading for Haggard's country." He cocked his head to the artistic angle that had first won his wife. "What a vision for old Haggard's breakfast," he marveled. "A unicorn coming to call, bold as you please, rat-tat-tat on his dismal door. I'd give anything to see—"

"I suppose the two of you didn't spend the *whole* day watching unicorns," his wife interrupted with a click of her beak. "At least, I understand that *she* used to be considered quite imaginative in matters of spare time." She advanced on him, her neck feathers ruffling.

"Honey, I haven't even seen her—" the blue jay began, and his wife knew that he hadn't, and wouldn't dare, but she batted him one anyway. She was one woman who knew what to do with a slight moral edge.

The unicorn and the magician walked through the spring, over soft Cat Mountain and down into a violet valley where apple trees grew. Beyond the valley were low hills, as fat and docile as sheep, lowering their heads to sniff at the unicorn in wonder as she moved among them. After these came the slower heights of summer, and the baked plains where the air hung shiny as candy. Together she and Schmendrick forded rivers, scrambled up and down brambly banks and bluffs, and wandered in woods that reminded the unicorn of her home, though they could never resemble it, having known time. So has my forest, now, she thought, but she told herself that it did not matter, that all would be as before when she returned.

At night, while Schmendrick slept the sleep of a hungry, footsore magician, the unicorn crouched awake waiting to see the vast form of the Red Bull come charging out of the moon. At times she caught what she was sure was his smell—a dark, sly reek easing through the night, reaching out to find her. Then she would spring to her feet with a cold cry of readiness, only to find two or three deer gazing at her from a respectful distance. Deer love and envy unicorns. Once, a buck in his second summer, prodded forward by his giggling friends, came quite close to her and mumbled without meeting her eyes, "You are very beautiful. You are just as beautiful as our mothers said."

The unicorn looked silently back at him, knowing that he expected no answer from her. The other deer snickered and whispered, "Go on, go on." Then the buck raised his head and cried out swiftly and joyously, "But I know someone more beautiful than you!" He wheeled and dashed away in the moonlight, and his friends followed him. The unicorn lay down again.

Now and then in their journey they came to a village, and there Schmendrick would introduce himself as a wandering wizard, offering, as he cried in the streets, "to sing for my supper, to bother you just a little bit, to trouble your sleep ever so slightly, and pass on." Few were the towns where he was not invited to stable his beautiful white mare and stay the night, and before the children went to bed he would perform in the market square by lantern light. He never actually attempted any greater magic than making dolls talk and turning soap into sweets, and even this trifling sorcery sometimes slipped from his hands. But the children liked him, and their parents were kindly with supper, and the summer evenings were lithe and soft. Ages after, the unicorn still remembered the strange, chocolate stable smell, and Schmendrick's shadow dancing on walls and doors and chimneys in the leaping light.

In the mornings they went on their way, Schmendrick's pockets full of bread and cheese and oranges, and the unicorn pacing beside him: sea white in the sun, sea green in the dark of the trees. His tricks were forgotten before he was out of sight, but his white mare troubled the nights of many a villager, and there were women who woke weeping from dreams of her.

One evening, they stopped in a plump, comfortable town where even the beggars had double chins and the mice waddled. Schmendrick was immediately asked to dinner with the Mayor and several of the rounder Councilmen; and the unicorn, unrecognized as always, was turned loose in a pasture where the grass grew sweet as milk. Dinner was served out of doors, at a table in the square, for the night was warm and the Mayor was pleased to show off his guest. It was an excellent dinner.

During the meal Schmendrick told stories of his life as an errant enchanter, filling it with kings and dragons and noble ladies. He was not lying, merely organizing events more sensibly, and so his tales had a taste of truth even to the canny Councilmen. Not only they, but all manner of folk passing in the street leaned forward to understand the nature of the spell that opened all locks, if properly applied. And there was not a one but lost a breath at sight of the marks on the magician's fingers. "Souvenir of my encounter with a harpy," Schmendrick explained calmly. "They bite."

"And were you never afraid?" a young girl wondered softly. The Mayor made a shooing noise at her, but Schmendrick lit a cigar and smiled at her through the smoke. "Fear and hunger have kept me young," he replied. He looked around the circle of dozing, rumbling Councilmen and winked widely at the girl.

The Mayor was not offended. "It's true," he sighed, caressing his dinner with linked fingers. "We do lead a good life here, or if we don't, I don't know anything about it. I sometimes think that a little fear, a little hunger, might be good for us—sharpen our souls, so to speak. That's why we always welcome strangers with tales to tell and songs to sing. They broaden our outlook . . . set us to looking inward . . ." He yawned and stretched himself, gurgling.

One of the Councilmen suddenly remarked, "My word, look at the pasture!" Heavy heads turned on nodding necks, and all saw the village's cows and sheep and horses clustered at the far end of the field, staring at the magician's white mare, who was placidly cropping the cool grass. No animal made a noise. Even the pigs and geese were as silent as ghosts. A crow called once, far away, and his cry drifted through the sunset like a single cinder.

"Remarkable," the Mayor murmured. "Most remarkable."

"Yes, isn't she?" the magician agreed. "If I were to tell you some of the offers I've had for her—"

"The interesting thing," said the Councilman who had spoken first, "is that they don't seem to be afraid of her. They have an air of awe, as though they were doing her some sort of reverence."

"They see what you have forgotten how to see." Schmendrick had drunk his share of red wine, and the young girl was staring at him with eyes both sweeter and shallower than the unicorn's eyes. He thumped his glass on the table and told the smiling Mayor, "She is a rarer creature than you dare to dream. She is a myth, a memory, a will-o'-the-wish. Wail-o'-the-wisp. If you remembered, if you hungered—"

His voice was lost in a gust of hoofbeats and the clamor of children. A dozen horsemen, dressed in autumn rags, came galloping into the square, howling and laughing, scattering the townsfolk like marbles. They formed a line and clattered around the square, knocking over whatever came in their way and shrieking incomprehensible brags and challenges to no one in particular. One rider rose up in his saddle, bent his bow, and shot the weathercock off the church spire; another snatched up Schmendrick's hat, jammed it on his own head, and rode on roaring. Some swung screaming children to their saddlebows, and others contented themselves with wineskins and sandwiches. Their eyes gleamed madly in their shaggy faces, and their laughter was like drums.

The round Mayor stood fast until he caught the eye of the raiders' leader. Then he raised one eyebrow; the man snapped his fingers, and immediately the horses were still and the ragged men as silent as the village animals before the unicorn. They put the children gently on the ground, and gave back most of the wineskins.

"Jack Jingly, if you please," the Mayor said calmly.

The leader of the horsemen dismounted and walked slowly toward the table where the Councilmen and their guest had dined. He was a huge man, nearly seven feet tall, and at every step he rang and jangled because of the rings and bells and bracelets that were sewn to his patched jerkin. "Evenin', Yer Honor," he said in a gruff chuckle.

"Let's get the business over with," the Mayor told him. "I don't see why you can't come riding in quietly, like civilized people."

"Ah, the boys don't mean no harm, Yer Honor," the giant grumbled good-naturedly. "Cooped up in the greenwood all day, they need a little relaxing, a little catharsis, like. Well, well, to it, eh?" With a sigh, he took a wizened bag of coins from his waist and placed it in the Mayor's open hand. "There you be, Yer Honor," said Jack Jingly. "It ben't much, but we can't spare no more than that."

The Mayor poured the coins into his palm and pushed at them with a fat finger, grunting. "It certainly isn't much," he complained. "It isn't even as much as last month's take, and that was shriveled enough. You're a woeful lot of freebooters, you are."

"It's hard times," Jack Jingly answered sullenly. "We ben't to blame if travelers have no more gold than we. You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip, you know."

"I can," the Mayor said. He scowled savagely and shook his fist at the giant outlaw. "And if you're holding out on me," he shouted, "if you're feathering your own pockets at my expense, I'll squeeze you, my friend, I'll squeeze you to pulp and peel and let the wind take you. Be off now, and tell it to your tattered captain. Away, villains!"

As Jack Jingly turned away, muttering, Schmendrick cleared his throat and said hesitantly, "I'll have my hat, if you don't mind."

The giant stared at him out of bloodshot buffalo eyes, saying nothing. "My hat," Schmendrick requested in a firmer voice. "One of your men took my hat, and it would be wise for him to return it."

"Wise, is it?" grunted Jack Jingly at last. "And who be you, pray, that knows what wisdom is?"

The wine was still leaping in Schmendrick's own eyes. "I am Schmendrick the Magician, and I make a bad enemy," he declared. "I am older than I look, and less amiable. My hat."

Jack Jingly regarded him a few moments longer; then he walked back to his horse, stepped over it, and sat down in the saddle. He rode forward until he was hardly a beard's thickness from the waiting Schmendrick. "Na, then," he boomed, "if you be a magician, do summat tricksy. Turn ma nose green, fill ma saddlebags with snow, disappear ma beard. Show me some magic, or show me your heels." He pulled a rusty dagger from his belt and dangled it by the point, whistling maliciously.

"The magician is my guest," the Mayor warned, but Schmendrick said solemnly, "Very well. On your head be it." Making sure with the edge of his eye that the young girl was watching him, he pointed at the scarecrow crew grinning behind their leader and said something that rhymed. Instantly, his black hat snatched itself from the fingers of the man who held it and floated slowly through the darkening air, silent as an owl. Two women fainted, and the Mayor sat down. The outlaws cried out in children's voices.

Down the length of the square sailed the black hat, as far as a horse trough where it dipped low and scooped itself full of water. Then, almost invisible in the shadows, it came drifting back, apparently aiming straight for the unwashed head of Jack Jingly. He covered himself with his hands, muttering, "Na, na, call it off," and even his own men snickered in anticipation. Schmendrick smiled triumphantly and snapped his fingers to hasten the hat.

But as it neared the outlaw leader the hat's flight began to curve, gradually at first, and then much more sharply as it bent toward the Councilmen's table. The Mayor had just time to lunge to his feet before the hat settled itself comfortably on his head. Schmendrick ducked in time, but a couple of the closer Councilmen were slightly splattered.

In the roar of laughter—varyingly voluntary—that went up, Jack Jingly leaned from his horse and swept up Schmendrick the Magician, who was trying to dry the spluttering Mayor with the tablecloth. "I misdoubt ye'll be asked for encores," the giant bellowed in his ear. "You'd best come with us." He threw Schmendrick face down across his saddlebow and galloped away, followed by his shabby cohorts. Their snorts and belches and guffaws lingered in the square long after the sound of hooves had died away.

Men came running to ask the Mayor if they should pursue to rescue the magician, but he shook his wet head, saying, "I hardly think it will be necessary. If our guest is the man he claims to be, he should be able to take care of himself quite well. And if he isn't—why then, an imposter taking advantage of our hospitality has no claim on us for assistance. No, no, never mind about him."

Creeks were running down his jowls to join the brooks of his neck and the river of his shirt front, but he turned his placid gaze toward the pasture where the magician's white mare glimmered in the darkness. She was trotting back and forth before the fence, making no sound. The Mayor said softly, "I think it might be well to take good care of our departed friend's mount, since he evidently prized her so highly." He sent two men to the pasture with instructions to rope the mare and put her in the strongest stall of his own stable.

But the men had not yet reached the pasture gate when the white mare jumped the fence and was gone into the night like a falling star. The two men stood where they were for a time, not heeding the Mayor's commands to come back; and neither ever said, even to the other, why he stared after the magician's mare so long. But now and then after that, they laughed with wonder in the middle of very serious events, and so came to be considered frivolous sorts.

V

All that Schmendrick remembered later of his wild ride with the outlaws was the wind, the saddle's edge, and the laughter of the jingling giant. He was too busy brooding over the ending of his hat trick to notice much else. Too much english, he suggested to himself. Overcompensation. But he shook his head, which was difficult in his position. The magic knows what it wants to do, he thought, bouncing as the horse dashed across a creek. But I never know what it knows. Not at the right time, anyway. I'd write it a letter, if I knew where it lived.

Brush and branches raked his face, and owls hooted in his ears. The horses had slowed to a trot, then to a walk. A high, trembling voice called out, "Halt and give the password!"

"Damme, here we go," Jack Jingly muttered. He scratched his head with a sound like sawing, raised his voice, and answered, "A short life and a merry one, here in the sweet greenwood; jolly comrades united, to victory plighted—"

"Liberty," the thin voice corrected. "To liberty plighted. The *I* sound makes all the difference."

"Thank 'ee. To liberty plighted. Comrades united—na, na, I said that. A short life and a merry one, jolly comrades—na, that's not it." Jack Jingly scratched his head again and groaned. "To liberty plighted—gi'me a little help, will ye?"

"All for one and one for all," the voice said obligingly. "Can you get the rest yourself?"

"All for one and one for all—I haven't!" the giant shouted. "All for one and one for all, united we stand, divided we fall." He kicked his horse and started on again.

An arrow squealed out of the dark, sliced a wedge from his ear, nicked the horse of the man riding behind him, and skittered away like a bat. The outlaws scattered to the safety of the trees, and Jack Jingly yelled with rage, "Damn your eyes, I gave the password ten times over! Let me only get my hands on 'ee—"

"We changed the password while you were gone, Jack," came the voice of the sentry. "It was too hard to remember."

"Ah, you changed the password, did ye?" Jack Jingly dabbed at his bleeding ear with a fold of Schmendrick's cloak. "And how was I to know that, ye brainless, tripeless, liverless get?"

"Don't get mad, Jack," the sentry answered soothingly. "You see, it doesn't really matter if you don't know the new password, because it's so simple. You just call like a giraffe. The captain thought of it himself."

"Call like a giraffe." The giant swore till even the horses fidgeted with embarrassment. "Ye ninny, a giraffe makes no sound at all. The captain might as well have us call like a fish or a butterfly."

"I know. That way, nobody can forget the password, even you. Isn't the captain clever?"

"There's no limit to the man," Jack Jingly said wonderingly. "But see here, what's to keep a ranger or one of the king's men from calling like a giraffe when ye hail him?"

"Aha," the sentry chuckled. "That's where the cleverness of it is. You have to give the call three times. Two long and one short."

Jack Jingly sat silent on his horse, rubbing his ear. "Two long and one short," he sighed presently. "Awell, 'tis no more foolish than the time he'd have no password at all, and shot any who answered the challenge. Two long and one short, right." He rode on through the trees, and his men trailed after him.

Voices murmured somewhere ahead, sullen as robbed bees. As they drew nearer Schmendrick thought he could make out a woman's tone among them. Then his cheek felt firelight, and he looked up. They had halted in a small clearing where another ten or twelve men sat around a campfire, fretting and grumbling. The air smelled of burned beans.

A freckled, red-haired man, dressed in somewhat richer rags than the rest, strode forward to greet them. "Well, Jack," he cried. "Who is't you bring us, comrade or captive?" Over his shoulder he called to someone, "Add some more water to the soup, love; there's company."

"I don't know what he is maself," Jack Jingly rumbled.

He began to tell the story of the Mayor and the hat, but he had hardly reached the roaring descent upon the town when he was interrupted by a thin thorn of a woman who came pushing through the ring of men to shrill, "I'll not have it, Cully, the soup's no thicker than sweat as it is!" She had a pale, bony face with fierce, tawny eyes, and hair the color of dead grass.

"And who's this long lout?" she asked, inspecting Schmendrick as though he were something she had found sticking to the sole of her shoes. "He's no townsman. I don't like the look of him. Slit his wizard."

She had meant to say either "weasand" or "gizzard," and had said both, but the coincidence trailed down Schmendrick's spine like wet seaweed. He slid off Jack Jingly's horse and stood before the outlaw captain. "I am Schmendrick the Magician," he announced, swirling his cloak with both hands until it billowed feebly. "And are you truly the famous Captain Cully of the greenwood, boldest of the bold and freest of the free?"

A few of the outlaws snickered, and the woman groaned. "I knew it," she declared. "Gut him, Cully, from gills to guilt, before he does you the way the last one did." But the captain bowed proudly, showing an eddy of baldness on his crown, and answered, "That am I. He who hunts me for my head shall find a fearful foe, but he who seeks me as a friend may find me friend enow. How do you come here, sir?"

"On my stomach," said Schmendrick, "and unintentionally, but in friendship nonetheless. Though your leman doubts it," he added nodding at the thin woman. She spat on the ground.

Captain Cully grinned and laid his arm warily along the woman's sharp shoulders. "Ah, that's only Molly Grue's way," he explained. "She guards me better than I do myself. I am generous and easy; to the point of extravagance, perhaps—an open hand to all fugitives from tyranny, that's my motto. It is only natural that Molly should become suspicious, pinched, dour, prematurely old, even a touch tyrannical. The bright balloon needs the knot at one end, eh, Molly? But she's a good heart, a good heart." The woman shrugged herself away from him, but the captain did not turn his head. "You are welcome here, sir sorcerer," he told Schmendrick. "Come to the fire and tell us your tale. How do they speak of me in your country? What have you heard of dashing Captain Cully and his band of freemen? Have a taco."

Schmendrick accepted the place by the fire, graciously declined the gelid morsel, and replied, "I have heard that you are the friend of the helpless and the enemy of the mighty, and that you and your merry men lead a joyous life in the forest, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. I know the tale of how you and Jack Jingly cracked one another's crowns with quarterstaves and became blood brothers thereby; and how you saved your Molly from marriage to the rich old man her father had chosen for her." In fact, Schmendrick had never heard of Captain Cully before that very evening, but he had a good grounding in Anglo-Saxon folklore and knew the type. "And of course," he hazarded, "there was a certain wicked king—"

"Haggard, rot and ruin him!" Cully cried. "Aye, there's not one here but's been done wrong by old King Haggard—driven from his rightful land, robbed of his rank and rents, skinned out of his patrimony. They live only for revenge—mark you, magician—and one day Haggard will pay such a reckoning—"

A score of shaggy shadows hissed assent, but Molly Grue's laughter fell like hail, rattling and stinging. "Mayhap he will," she mocked, "but it won't be to such chattering cravens he'll pay it. His castle rots and totters more each day, and his men are too old to stand up in armor, but he'll rule forever, for all Captain Cully dares."

Schmendrick raised an eyebrow, and Cully flushed radish-red. "You must understand," he mumbled. "King Haggard has this Bull—"

"Ah, the Red Bull, the Red Bull!" Molly hooted. "I tell you what, Cully, after all these years in the wood with you I've come to think the Bull's nought but the pet name you give your cowardice. If I hear that fable once more, I'll go and down old Haggard myself, and know you for a—"

"Enough!" Cully roared. "Not before strangers!" He tugged at his sword and Molly opened her arms to it, still laughing. Around the fire, greasy hands twiddled dagger hilts and longbows seemed to string themselves, but Schmendrick spoke up then, seeking to salvage Cully's sinking vanity. He hated family scenes.

"They sing a ballad of you in my country," he began. "I forget just how it goes—"

Captain Cully spun like a cat ambushing its own tail. "Which one?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Schmendrick answered, taken aback. "Is there more than one?"

"Aye, indeed!" Cully cried, glowing and growing, as though pregnant with his pride. "Willie Gentle! Willie Gentle! Where is the lad?"

A lank-haired youth with a lute and pimples shambled up. "Sing one of my exploits for the gentleman," Captain Cully ordered him. "Sing the one about how you joined my band. I've not heard it since Tuesday last."

The minstrel sighed, struck a chord, and began to sing in a wobbly countertenor:

"Oh, it was Captain Cully came riding home
From slaying of the king's gay deer,
When whom should he spy but a pale young man,
Came drooping o'er the lea?

" 'What news, what news, my pretty young man?
What ails ye, that ye sigh so deep?
Is it for the loss of your lady fair?
Or are ye but scabbit in your greep?'

" 'I am nae scabbit, whatever that means,
And my greep is as well as a greep may be,
But I do sigh for my lady fair
Whom my three brothers ha' riven from me.'

" 'I am Captain Cully of the sweet greenwood,
And the men at my call are fierce and free.
If I do rescue your lady fair,
What service will ye render me?'

" 'If ye do rescue my lady fair,
I will break your nose, ye silly auld gowk.
But she wore an emerald at her throat,
Which my three brothers also took.'

"Then the captain has gone to the three bold thieves,
And he's made his sword baith to shiver and sing.
'Ye may keep the lass, but I'll hae the stane,
For it's fit for the crown of a royal king.' "

"Now comes the best part," Cully whispered to Schmendrick. He was bouncing eagerly on his toes, hugging himself.

"Then it's three cloaks off, and it's three swords out,
And it's three swords whistling like the tea.
'By the faith of my body,' says Captain Cully,
Now ye shall have neither the stane nor she.'

"And he's driven them up, and he's driven them down,
And he's driven them to and fro like sheep—"

"Like sheep," Cully breathed. He rocked and hummed and parried three swords with his forearm for the remaining seventeen stanzas of the song, rapturously oblivious to Molly's mockery and the restlessness of his men. The ballad ended at last, and Schmendrick applauded loudly and earnestly, complimenting Willie Gentle on his right-hand technique.

"I call it Alan-a-Dale picking," the minstrel answered.

He would have expounded further, but Cully interrupted him, saying, "Good, Willie, good boy, now play the others." He beamed at what Schmendrick hoped was an expression of pleased surprise. "I said that there were several songs about me. There are thirty-one, to be exact, though none are in the Child collection just at present—" His eyes widened suddenly, and he grasped the magician's shoulders. "You wouldn't be Mr. Child himself, now would you?" he demanded. "He often goes seeking ballads, so I've heard, disguised as a plain man—"

Schmendrick shook his head. "No, I'm very sorry, really."

The captain sighed and released him. "It doesn't matter," he murmured. "One always hopes, of course, even now—to be collected, to be verified, annotated, to have variant versions, even to have one's authenticity doubted . . . well, well, never mind. Sing the other songs, Willie lad. You'll need the practice one day, when you're field-recorded."

The outlaws grumbled and scuffed, kicking at stones. A hoarse voice bawled from a safe shadow, "Na, Willie, sing us a true song. Sing us one about Robin Hood."

"Who said that?" Cully's loosened sword clacked in its sheath as he turned from side to side. His face suddenly seemed as pale and weary as a used lemon drop.

"I did," said Molly Grue, who hadn't. "The men are bored with ballads of your bravery, captain darling. Even if you did write them all yourself."

Cully winced and stole a side glance at Schmendrick. "They can still be folk songs, can't they, Mr. Child?" he asked in a low, worried voice. "After all—"

"I'm not Mr. Child," Schmendrick said. "Really I'm not."

"I mean, you can't leave epic events to the people. They get everything wrong."

An aging rogue in tattered velvet now slunk forward. "Captain, if we're to have folk songs, and I suppose we must, then we feel they ought to be true songs about real outlaws, not this lying life we live. No offense, captain, but we're really not very merry, when all's said—"

"I'm merry twenty-four hours a day, Dick Fancy," Cully said coldly. "That is a fact."

"And we don't steal from the rich and give to the poor," Dick Fancy hurried on. "We steal from the poor because they can't fight back—most of them—and the rich take from us because they could wipe us out in a day. We don't rob the fat, greedy Mayor on the highway; we pay him tribute every month to leave us alone. We never carry off proud bishops and keep them prisoner in the wood, feasting and entertaining them, because Molly hasn't any good dishes, and besides, we just wouldn't be very stimulating company for a bishop. When we go to the fair in disguise, we never win at the archery or at singlestick. We do get some nice compliments on our disguises, but no more than that."

"I sent a tapestry to the judging once," Molly remembered. "It came in fourth. Fifth. A knight at vigil—everyone was doing vigils that year." Suddenly she was scrubbing her eyes with horny knuckles. "Damn you, Cully."

"What, what?" he yelled in exasperation. "Is it my fault you didn't keep up with your weaving? Once you had your man, you let all your accomplishments go. You don't sew or sing any more, you haven't illuminated a manuscript in years —and what happened to that viola da gamba I got you?" He turned to Schmendrick. "We might as well be married, the way she's gone to seed." The magician nodded fractionally, and looked away.

"And as for righting wrongs and fighting for civil liberties, that sort of thing," Dick Fancy said, "it wouldn't be so bad—I mean, I'm not the crusader type myself, some are and some aren't—but then we have to sing those songs about wearing Lincoln green and aiding the oppressed. We don't, Cully, we turn them in for the reward, and those songs are just embarrassing, that's all, and there's the truth of it."

Captain Cully folded his arms, ignoring the outlaws' snarls of agreement. "Sing the songs, Willie."

"I'll not." The minstrel would not raise a hand to touch his lute. "And you never fought my brothers for any stone, Cully! You wrote them a letter, which you didn't sign—"

Cully drew back his arm, and blades blinked among the men as though someone had blown on a heap of coals. At this point Schmendrick stepped forward again, smiling urgently. "If I may offer an alternative," he suggested, "why not let your guest earn his night's lodging by amusing you? I can neither sing nor play, but I have my own accomplishments, and you may not have seen their like."

Jack Jingly agreed immediately, saying, "Aye, Cully, a magician!" 'Twould be a rare treat for the lads." Molly Grue grumbled some savage generalization about wizards as a class, but the men shouted with quick delight, throwing one another into the air. The only reluctance was shown by Captain Cully himself, who protested sadly, "Yes, but the songs. Mr. Child must hear the songs."

"And so I will," Schmendrick assured him. "Later." Cully brightened then and cried to his men to give way and make room. They sprawled and squatted in the shadows, watching with sprung grins as Schmendrick began to run through the old flummeries with which he had entertained the country folk at the Midnight Carnival. It was paltry magic, but he thought it diverting enough for such a crew as Cully's.

But he had judged them too easily. They applauded his rings and scarves, his ears full of goldfish and aces, with a proper politeness but without wonder. Offering no true magic, he drew no magic back from them; and when a spell failed—as when, promising to turn a duck into a duke for them to rob, he produced a handful of duke cherries—he was clapped just as kindly and vacantly as though he had succeeded. They were a perfect audience.

Cully smiled impatiently, and Jack Jingly dozed, but it startled the magician to see the disappointment in Molly Grue's restless eyes. Sudden anger made him laugh. He dropped seven spinning balls that had been glowing brighter and brighter as he juggled them (on a good evening, he could make them catch fire), let go all his hated skills, and closed his eyes. "Do as you will," he whispered to the magic. "Do as you will."

It sighed through him, beginning somewhere secret—in his shoulderblade, perhaps, or in the marrow of his shinbone. His heart filled and tautened like a sail, and something moved more surely in his body than he ever had. It spoke with his voice, commanding. Weak with power, he sank to his knees and waited to be Schmendrick again.

I wonder what I did. I did something.

He opened his eyes. Most of the outlaws were chuckling and tapping their temples, glad of the chance to mock him. Captain Cully had risen, anxious to pronounce that part of the entertainment ended. Then Molly Grue cried out in a soft, shaking voice, and all turned to see what she saw. A man came walking into the clearing.

He was dressed in green, but for a brown jerkin and a slanting brown cap with a woodcock's feather in it. He was very tall, too tall for a living man: the great bow slung over his shoulder looked as long as Jack Jingly, and his arrows would have made spears or staves for Captain Cully. Taking no notice at all of the still, shabby forms by the fire, he strode through the night and vanished, with no sound of breath or footfall.

After him came others, one at a time or two together, some conversing, many laughing, but none making any sound. All carried longbows and all wore green, save one who came clad in scarlet to his toes, and another gowned in a friar's brown habit, his feet in sandals and his enormous belly contained by a rope belt. One played a lute and sang silently as he walked.

"Alan-a-Dale." It was raw Willie Gentle. "*Look* at those changes." His voice was as naked as a baby bird.

Effortlessly proud, graceful as giraffes (even the tallest among them, a kind-eyed Blunderbore), the bowmen moved across the clearing. Last, hand in hand, came a man and a woman. Their faces were as beautiful as though they had never known fear. The woman's heavy hair shone with a secret, like a cloud that hides the moon.

"Oh," said Molly Grue. "Marian."

"Robin Hood is a myth," Captain Cully said nervously, "a classic example of the heroic folk-figures synthesized out of need. John Henry is another. Men have to have heroes, but no man can ever be as big as the need, and so a legend grows around a grain of truth, like a pearl. Not that it isn't a remarkable trick, of course."

It was the seedy dandy Dick Fancy who moved first. All the figures but the last two had passed into the darkness when he rushed after them, calling, hoarsely, "Robin, Robin, Mr. Hood sir, wait for me!" Neither the man nor the woman turned, but every man of Cully's band—saving only Jack Jingly and the captain himself—ran to the clearing's edge, tripping and trampling one another, kicking the fire so that the clearing churned with shadows. "Robin!" they shouted; and

"Marian, Scarlet, Little John—come back! Come back!" Schmendrick began to laugh, tenderly and helplessly.

Over their voices, Captain Cully screamed, "Fools, fools and children! It was a lie, like all magic! There is no such person as Robin Hood!" But the outlaws, wild with loss, went crashing into the woods after the shining archers, stumbling over logs, falling through thorn bushes, wailing hungrily as they ran.

Only Molly Grue stopped and looked back. Her face was burning white.

"Nay, Cully, you have it backward," she called to him. "There's no such a person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend!" Then she ran on, crying, "Wait, wait!" like the others, leaving Captain Cully and Jack Jingly to stand in the trampled firelight and listen to the magician's laughter.

Schmendrick hardly noticed when they sprang on him and seized his arms; nor did he flinch when Cully pricked his ribs with a dagger, hissing, "That was a dangerous diversion, Mr. Child, and rude as well. You could have said you didn't want to hear the songs." The dagger twitched deeper.

Far away, he heard Jack Jingly growl, "He's na Child, Cully, nor is he any journeyman wizard, neither. I know him now. He's Haggard's son, the prince Lír, as foul as his father and doubtless handy with the black arts. Hold your hand, captain—he's no good to us dead."

Cully's voice drooped. "Are you sure, Jack? He seemed such a pleasant fellow."

"Pleasant fool, ye mean. Aye, Lír has that air, I've heard tell. He plays the gormless innocent, but he's the devil for deception. The way he gave out to be this Child cove, just to get you off your guard."

"I wasn't off my guard, Jack," Cully protested. "Not for a moment. I may have seemed to be, but I'm very deceptive myself."

"And the way he called up Robin Hood to fill the lads with longing and turn them against you. Ah, but he gave himself away that time, and now he'll bide with us though his father send the Red Bull to free him." Cully caught his breath at that, but the giant snatched up the unresisting magician for the second time that night and bore him to a great tree, where he bound him with his face to the trunk and his arms stretched around it. Schmendrick giggled gently all through the operation, and made matters easier by hugging the tree as fondly as a new bride.

"There," Jack Jingly said at last. "Do ye guard him the night, Cully, whiles I sleep, and in the morning it's me to old Haggard to see what his boy's worth to him. Happen we'll all be gentlemen of leisure in a month's time."

"What of the men?" Cully asked worriedly. "Will they come back, do you think?"

The giant yawned and turned away. "They'll be back by morning, sad and sneezing, and ye'll have to be easy with them for a bit. They'll be back, for they'm not the sort to trade something for nothing, and no more am I. Robin Hood might have stayed for us if we were. Good night to ye, captain."

There was no sound when he was gone but crickets, and Schmendrick's soft chuckling to the tree. The fire faded, and Cully turned in circles, sighing as each ember went out. Finally he sat down on a stump and addressed the captive magician.

"Haggard's son you may be," he mused, "and not the collector Child, as you claim. But whoever you are, you know very well that Robin Hood is the fable and I am the reality. No ballads will accumulate around my name unless I write them myself; no children will read of my adventures in their schoolbooks and play at being me after school. And when the professors prowl through the old tales, and scholars sift the old songs to learn if Robin Hood ever truly lived, they will never, never find my name, not till they crack the world for the grain of its heart. But you know, and therefore I am going to sing you the songs of Captain Cully. He was a good, gay rascal who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. In their gratitude, the people made up these simple verses about him."

Whereupon he sang them all, including the one that Willie Gentle had sung for Schmendrick. He paused often to comment on the varying rhythm patterns, the assonantal rhymes, and the modal melodies.

VI

Captain Cully fell asleep thirteen stanzas into the nineteenth song, and Schmendrick—who had stopped laughing somewhat sooner—promptly set about trying to free himself. He strained against his bonds with all his strength, but they held fast. Jack Jingly had wrapped him in enough rope to rig a small schooner, and tied knots the size of skulls.

"Gently, gently," he counseled himself. "No man with the power to summon Robin Hood—indeed, to create him—can be bound for long. A word, a wish, and this tree must be an acorn on a branch again, this rope be green in a marsh." But he knew before he called on it that whatever had visited him for a moment was gone again, leaving only an ache where it had been. He felt like an abandoned chrysalis.

"Do as you will," he said softly. Captain Cully roused at his voice, and sang the fourteenth stanza.

" 'There are fifty swords without the house, and
fifty more within,
And I do fear me, captain, they are like to do
us in.'
'Ha' done, ha' done,' says Captain Cully, 'and
never fear again,
For they may be a hundred swords, but we are
seven men.' "

"I hope you get slaughtered," the magician told him, but Cully was asleep again. Schmendrick attempted a few simple spells for escaping, but he could not use his hands, and he had no more heart for tricks. What happened instead was that the tree fell in love with him and began to murmur fondly of the joy to be found in the eternal embrace of a red oak. "Always, always," it sighed, "faithfulness beyond any man's deserving. I will keep the color of your eyes when no other in the world remembers your name. There is no immortality but a tree's love."

"I'm engaged," Schmendrick excused himself. "To a western larch. Since childhood. Marriage by contract, no choice in the matter. Hopeless. Our story is never to be."

A gust of fury shook the oak, as though a storm were coming to it alone. "Galls and fireblight on her!" it whispered savagely. "Damned softwood, cursed conifer, deceitful evergreen, she'll never have you! We will perish together, and all trees shall treasure our tragedy!"

Along his length Schmendrick could feel the tree heaving like a heart, and he feared that it might actually split in two with rage. The ropes were growing steadily tighter around him, and the night was beginning to turn red and yellow. He tried to explain to the oak that love was generous precisely because it could never be immortal, and then he tried to yell for Captain Cully; but he could only make a small, creaking sound, like a tree. "She means well," he thought, and gave himself up for loved.

Then the ropes went slack as he lunged against them, and he fell to the ground on his back, wriggling for air. The unicorn stood over him, dark as blood in his darkened vision. She touched him with her horn.

When he could rise she turned away, and the magician followed her, wary of the oak, though it was once again as still as any tree that had never loved. The sky was still black, but it was a watery darkness through which Schmendrick could see the violet dawn swimming. Hard silver clouds were melting as the sky grew warm; shadows dulled, sounds lost their shape, and shapes had not yet decided what they were going to be that day. Even the wind wondered about itself.

"Did you see me?" he asked the unicorn. "Were you watching, did you see what I made?"

"Yes," she answered. "It was true magic."

The loss came back, cold and bitter as a sword. "It's gone now," he said. "I had it—it had me—but it's gone now. I couldn't hold it." The unicorn floated on before him, silent as a feather.

Close by, a familiar voice said, "Leaving us so early, magician? The men will be sorry they missed you." He turned and saw Molly Grue leaning against a tree. Dress and dirty hair tattered alike, bare feet bleeding and beslimed, she gave him a bat's grin. "Surprise," she said. "It's Maid Marian."

Then she saw the unicorn. She neither moved nor spoke, but her tawny eyes were suddenly big with tears. For a long moment she did not move; then each fist seized a handful of her hem, and she warped her knees into a kind of trembling crouch. Her ankles were crossed and her eyes were lowered, but for all that it took Schmendrick another moment to realize that Molly Grue was curtsying.

He burst out laughing, and Molly sprang up, red from hairline to throat-hollow. "Where have you been?" she cried. "Damn you, where have you been?" She took a few steps toward Schmendrick, but she was looking beyond him, at the unicorn.

When she tried to get by, the magician stood in her way. "You don't talk like that," he told her, still uncertain that Molly had recognized the unicorn. "Don't you know how to behave, woman? You don't curtsy, either."

But Molly pushed him aside and went up to the unicorn, scolding her as though she were a strayed milk cow. "*Where have you been?*" Before the whiteness and the shining horn, Molly shrank to a shrilling beetle, but this time it was the unicorn's old dark eyes that looked down.

"I am here now," she said at last.

Molly laughed with her lips flat. "And what good is it to me that you're here now? Where were you twenty years ago, ten years ago? How dare you, how dare you come to me now, when I am *this*?" With a flap of her hand she summed herself up: barren face, desert eyes, and yellowing heart. "I wish you had never come, why do you come now?" The tears began to slide down the sides of her nose.

The unicorn made no reply, and Schmendrick said, "She is the last. She is the last unicorn in the world."

"She would be." Molly sniffed. "It would be the last unicorn in the world that came to Molly Grue." She reached up then to lay her hand on the unicorn's cheek; but both of them flinched a little, and the touch came to rest on the swift, shivering place under the jaw. Molly said, "It's all right. I forgive you."

"Unicorns are not to be forgiven." The magician felt himself growing giddy with jealousy, not only of the touch but of something like a secret that was moving between Molly and the unicorn. "Unicorns are for beginnings," he said, "for innocence and purity, for newness. Unicorns are for young girls."

Molly was stroking the unicorn's throat as timidly as though she were blind. She dried her grimy tears on the white mane. "You don't know much about unicorns," she said.

The sky was jade-gray now, and the trees that had been drawn on the dark a moment ago were real trees again, hissing in the dawn wind. Schmendrick said coldly, looking at the unicorn, "We must go."

Molly agreed promptly. "Aye, before the men stumble on us and slit your throat for cheating them, the poor lads." She looked over her shoulder. "I had some things I wanted to take, but they don't matter now. I'm ready."

Schmendrick barred her way again as he stepped forward. "You can't come with us. We are on a quest." His voice and eyes were as stern as he could make them, but he could feel his nose being bewildered. He had never been able to discipline his nose.

Molly's own face closed like a castle against him, trundling out the guns and slings and caldrons of boiling lead. "And who are you to say '*we*'?"

"I'm her guide," the magician said importantly. The unicorn made a soft, wondering sound, like a cat calling her kittens. Molly laughed aloud, and made it back.

"You don't know much about unicorns," she repeated. "She's letting you travel with her, though I can't think why, but she has no need of you. She doesn't need me either, heaven knows, but she'll take me too. Ask her." The unicorn made the soft sound again, and the castle of Molly's face lowered the drawbridge and threw wide even its deepest keep. "Ask her," she said.

Schmendrick knew the unicorn's answer by the sinking in his heart. He meant to be wise, but then his envy and emptiness hurt him, and he heard himself cry out sadly, "Never! I forbid it—I, Schmendrick the Magician!" His voice darkened, and even his nose grew menacing. "Be wary of wousing a wizard's wrath! Rousing. If I chose to turn you into a frog—"

"I should laugh myself sick," said Molly Grue pleasantly. "You're handy with fairy tales, but you can't turn cream into butter." Her eyes gleamed with a sudden mean understanding. "Have sense, man," she said. "What were you going to do with the last unicorn in the world—keep her in a cage?"

The magician turned away to keep Molly from seeing his face. He did not look directly at the unicorn, but stole small sights of her as stealthily as though he could be made to put them back. White and secret, morning-horned, she regarded him with piercing gentleness, but he could not touch her. He said to the thin woman, "You don't even know where we are bound."

"Do you think it matters to me?" Molly asked. She made the cat sound once more.

Schmendrick said, "We are journeying to King Haggard's country, to find the Red Bull."

Molly's skin was frightened for a moment, whatever her bones believed or her heart knew; but then the unicorn breathed softly into her cupped hand, and Molly smiled as she closed her fingers on the warmth.

"Well, you're going the wrong way," she said.

The sun was rising as she led them back the way they had come, past Cully, still slumped asleep on his stump, across the clearing, and away. The men were returning: dead branches cracked close at hand, and brush broke with a splashing sound. Once they had to crouch among thorns while two of Cully's weary rogues limped by, wondering bitterly whether the vision of Robin Hood had been real or not.

"I smelled them," the first man was saying. "Eyes are easy to deceive, and cheats by nature, but surely no shadow has a smell?"

"The eyes are perjurors, right enough," grunted the second man, who seemed to be wearing a swamp. "But do you truly trust the testimony of your ears, of your nose, of the root of your tongue? Not I, my friend. The universe lies to our senses, and they lie to us, and how can we ourselves be anything but liars? For myself, I trust neither message nor messenger; neither what I am told, nor what I see. There may be truth somewhere, but it never gets down to me."

"Ah," said the first man with a black grin. "But you came running with the rest of us to go with Robin Hood, and you hunted for him all night, crying and calling like the rest of us. Why not save yourself the trouble, if you know better?"

"Well, you never know," the other answered thickly, spitting mud. "I could be wrong."

There were a prince and a princess sitting by a stream in a wooded valley. Their seven servants had set up a scarlet canopy beneath a tree, and the royal young couple ate a box lunch to the accompaniment of lutes and theorbos. They hardly spoke a word to one another until they had finished the meal, and then the princess sighed and said, "Well, I suppose I'd best get the silly business over with." The prince began to read a magazine.

"You might at least—" said the princess, but the prince kept on reading. The princess made a sign to two of the servants, who began to play an older music on their lutes. Then she took a few steps on the grass, held up a bridle bright as butter, and called, "Here, unicorn, here! Here, my pretty, here to me! Comecomecomecomecome!"

The prince snickered. "It's not your chickens you're calling, you know," he remarked without looking up. "Why don't you sing something, instead of clucking like that?"

"Well, I'm doing the best I can," the princess cried. "I've never called one of these things before." But after a little silence, she began to sing.

"I am a king's daughter,
And if I cared to care,
The moon that has no mistress
Would flutter in my hair.
No one dares to cherish
What I choose to crave.
Never have I hungered,
That I did not have.

"I am a king's daughter,
And I grow old within
The prison of my person,
The shackles of my skin.
And I would run away
And beg from door to door,
Just to see your shadow
Once, and never more."

So she sang, and sang again, and then she called, "Nice unicorn, pretty, pretty, pretty," for a little longer, and then she said angrily, "Well, I've done as much as I'll do. I'm going home."

The prince yawned and folded his magazine. "You satisfied custom well enough," he told her, "and no one expected more than that. It was just a formality. Now we can be married."

"Yes," the princess said, "now we can be married." The servants began to pack everything away again, while the two with the lutes played joyous wedding music. The princess's voice was a little sad and defiant as she said, "If there really were such things as unicorns, one would have come to me. I called as sweetly as anyone could, and I had the golden bridle. And of course I am pure and untouched."

"For all of me, you are," the prince answered indifferently. "As I say, you satisfy custom. You don't satisfy my father, but then neither do I. That would take a unicorn." He was tall, and his face was as soft and pleasant as a marshmallow.

When they and their retinue were gone, the unicorn came out of the wood, followed by Molly and the magician, and took up her journey again. A long time later, wandering in another country where there were no streams and nothing green, Molly asked her why she had not gone to the princess's song. Schmendrick drew near to listen to the answer, though he stayed on his side of the unicorn. He never walked on Molly's side.

The unicorn said, "That king's daughter would never have run away to see my shadow. If I had shown myself, and she had known me, she would have been more frightened than if she had seen a dragon, for no one makes promises to a dragon. I remember that once it never mattered to me whether or not princesses meant what they sang. I went to them all and laid my head in their laps, and a few of them rode on my back, though most were afraid. But I have no time for them now, princesses or kitchenmaids. I have no time."

Molly said something strange then, for a woman who never slept a night through without waking many times to see if the unicorn was still there, and whose dreams were all of golden bridles and gentle young thieves. "It's the princesses who have no time," she said. "The sky spins and drags everything along with it, princesses and magicians and poor Cully and all, but you stand still. You never see anything just once. I wish you could be a princess for a little while, or a flower, or a duck. Something that can't wait."

She sang a verse of a doleful, limping song, halting after each line as she tried to recall the next.

"Who has choices need not choose.
We must, who have none.
We can love but what we lose—
What is gone is gone."

Schmendrick peered over the unicorn's back into Molly's territory. "Where did you hear that song?" he demanded. It was the first he had spoken to her since the dawn when she joined the journey. Molly shook her head.

"I don't remember. I've known it a long time."

The land had grown leaner day by day as they traveled on, and the faces of the folk they met had grown bitter with the brown grass; but to the unicorn's eyes Molly was becoming a softer country, full of pools and caves, where old flowers came burning out of the ground. Under the dirt and indifference, she appeared only thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old—no older than Schmendrick, surely, despite the magician's birthdayless face. Her rough hair bloomed, her skin quickened, and her voice was nearly as gentle to all things as it was when she spoke to the unicorn. The eyes would never be joyous, any more than they could ever turn green or blue, but they too had wakened in the earth. She walked eagerly into King Haggard's realm on bare, blistered feet, and she sang often.

And far away on the other side of the unicorn, Schmendrick the Magician stalked in silence. His black cloak was sprouting holes, coming undone, and so was he. The rain that renewed Molly did not fall on him, and he seemed ever more parched and deserted, like the land itself. The unicorn could not heal him. A touch of her horn could have brought him back from death, but over despair she had no power, nor over magic that had come and gone.

So they journeyed together, following the fleeing darkness into a wind that tasted like nails. The rind of the country cracked, and the flesh of it peeled back into gullies and ravines or shriveled into scabby hills. The sky was so high and pale that it disappeared during the day, and the unicorn sometimes thought that the three of them must look as blind and helpless as slugs in the sunlight, with their log or their dank rock tumbled away. But she was a unicorn still, with a unicorn's way of growing more beautiful in evil times and places. Even the breath of the toads that grumbled in the ditches and dead trees stopped when they saw her.

Toads would have been more hospitable than the sullen folk of Haggard's country. Their villages lay bald as bones between knifelike hills where nothing grew, and they themselves had hearts unmistakably as sour as boiled beer. Their children stoned strangers into town, and their dogs chased them out again. Several of the dogs never returned, for Schmendrick had developed a quick hand and a taste for mongrel. This infuriated the townsmen as no mere theft would have done. They gave nothing away, and they knew that their enemies were those who did.

The unicorn was weary of human beings. Watching her companions as they slept, seeing the shadows of their dreams scurry over their faces, she would feel herself bending under the heaviness of knowing their names. Then she would run until morning to ease the ache; swifter than rain, swift as loss, racing to catch up with the time when she had known nothing at all but the sweetness of being herself. Often then, between the rush of one breath and the reach of another, it came to her that Schmendrick and Molly were long dead, and King Haggard as well, and the Red Bull met and mastered—so long ago that the grandchildren of the stars that had seen it all happen were withering now, turning to coal—and that she was still the only unicorn left in the world.

Then, one owl-less autumn evening, they rounded a ridge and saw the castle. It crept into the sky from the far side of a long, deep valley—thin and twisted, bristling with thorny turrets, dark and jagged as a giant's grin. Molly laughed outright, but the unicorn shivered, for to her the rooked towers seemed to be groping toward her through the dusk. Beyond the castle, the sea glimmered like iron.

"Haggard's fortress," Schmendrick murmured, shaking his head in wonderment. "Haggard's dire keep. A witch built it for him, they say, but he wouldn't pay her for her work, so she put a curse on the castle. She swore that one day it would sink into the sea with Haggard, when his greed caused the sea to overflow. Then she gave a fearful shriek, the way they do, and vanished in a sulphurous puff. Haggard moved in right away. He said no tyrant's castle was complete without a curse."

"I don't blame him for not paying her," Molly Grue said scornfully. "I could jump on that place myself and scatter it like a pile of leaves. Anyway, I hope the witch has something interesting to do while she waits for that curse to come home. The sea is greater than anyone's greed."

Bony birds struggled across the sky, screeling, "*Help*me, *help*me, *help*me!" and small black shapes bobbled at the lightless windows of King Haggard's castle. A wet, slow smell found the unicorn. "Where is the Bull?" she asked. "Where does Haggard keep the Bull?"

"No one keeps the Red Bull," the magician replied quietly. "I have heard that he roams at night, and lies up by day in a great cavern beneath the castle. We'll know soon enough, but that's not our problem now. The nearer danger lies *there*." He pointed down into the valley, where a few lights had begun to shiver.

"That is Hagsgate," he said.

Molly made no answer, but she touched the unicorn with a hand as cold as a cloud. She often put her hands on the unicorn when she was sad, or tired, or afraid.

"This is King Haggard's town," Schmendrick said, "the first one he took when he came over the sea, the one that has lain longest under his hand. It has a wicked name, though none I ever met could say exactly why. No one goes into Hagsgate, and nothing comes out of it but tales to make children behave—monsters, werebeasts, witch covens, demons in broad daylight, and the like. But there is something evil in Hagsgate, I think. Mommy Fortuna would never go there, and once she said that even Haggard was not safe while Hagsgate stood. There is something there."

He peered closely at Molly as he spoke, for it was his one bitter pleasure these days to see her frightened in spite of the white presence of the unicorn. But she answered him quite calmly, with her hands at her sides. "I have heard Hagsgate called '*the town that no man knows*.' Maybe its secret was waiting for a woman to find it out—a woman and a unicorn. But what's to be done with you?"

Schmendrick smiled then. "I'm no man," he said. "I'm a magician with no magic, and that's no one at all."

The foxfire lights of Hagsgate grew brighter as the unicorn watched them, but not even a flint flared in King Haggard's castle. It was too dark to see men moving on the walls, but across the valley she could hear the soft boom of armor and the clatter of pikes on stone. Sentinels had met, and marched away again. The smell of the Red Bull sported all around the unicorn as she started down the thin, brambly path that led to Hagsgate.

VII

THE TOWN of Hagsgate was shaped like a footprint: long toes splaying from a broad paw and ending in the dark claws of a digger. And indeed, where the other towns of King Haggard's realm seemed to scratch like sparrows at the mean land, Hagsgate was well and deeply dug in. Its streets were smoothly paved, its gardens glowed, and its proud houses might have grown up out of the earth, like trees. Lights shone in every window, and the three travelers could hear voices, and dogs barking, and dishes being scrubbed until they squeaked. They halted by a high hedge, wondering.

"Do you suppose we took a wrong turn somewhere, and this isn't Hagsgate at all?" Molly whispered. She brushed foolishly at her hopeless rags and tatters. "I knew I should have brought my good dress." She sighed.

Schmendrick rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "It's Hagsgate," he answered her. "It must be Hagsgate, and yet there's no smell of sorcery, no air of black magic. But why the legends, then, why the fables and fairy tales? Very confusing, especially when you've had half a turnip for dinner."

The unicorn said nothing. Beyond the town, darker than dark, King Haggard's castle teetered like a lunatic on stilts, and beyond the castle the sea slid. The scent of the Red Bull moved in the night, cold among the town smells of cooking and living. Schmendrick said, "The good people must all be indoors, counting their blessings. I'll hail them."

He stepped forward and threw back his cloak, but he had not yet opened his mouth when a hard voice said out of the air, "Save your breath, stranger, while you have it." Four men sprang from behind the hedge. Two of them set their swords at Schmendrick's throat, while another guarded Molly with a pair of pistols. The fourth approached the unicorn to seize her mane; but she reared up, shining fiercely, and he jumped away.

"Your name!" the man who had first spoken demanded of Schmendrick. He was middle-aged or more, as were they all, dressed in fine, dull clothing.

"Gick," said the magician, because of the swords.

"Gick," mused the man with the pistols. "An alien name."

"Naturally," the first man said. "All names are alien in Hagsgate. Well, Mr. Gick," he went on, lowering his sword slightly to the point where Schmendrick's collarbones converged, "if you and Mrs. Gick would kindly tell us what brings you skulking here—"

Schmendrick found his voice at that. "I hardly know the woman!" he roared. "My name is Schmendrick, Schmendrick the Magician, and I am hungry and tired and unpleasant. Put those things away, or you'll each have a scorpion by the wrong end."

The four men looked at one another. "A magician," said the first man. "The very thing."

Two of the others nodded, but the man who had tried to capture the unicorn grumbled, "Anyone can say he's a magician these days. The old standards are gone, the old values have been abandoned. Besides, a real magician has a beard."

"Well, if he isn't a magician," the first man said lightly, "he'll wish he were, soon enough." He sheathed his sword and bowed to Schmendrick and Molly. "I am Drinn," he said, "and it is possibly a pleasure to welcome you to Hagsgate. You spoke of being hungry, I believe. That's easily remedied—and then perhaps you will do us a good turn in your professional capacity. Come with me."

Grown suddenly gracious and apologetic, he led them toward a lighted inn, while the three other men followed close behind. More townsfolk came running up now, streaming eagerly from their houses with their own dinners half-eaten and their tea left steaming; so that by the time Schmendrick and Molly were seated, there were nearly a hundred people wedged together on the inn's long benches, jamming into the doorway and falling through the windows. The unicorn, unnoticed, paced slowly after: a white mare with strange eyes.

The man named Drinn sat at the same table with Schmendrick and Molly, chattering as they ate, and filling their glasses with a furry black wine. Molly Grue drank very little. She sat quietly looking at the faces around her and noting that none seemed any younger than Drinn's face, though a few were much older. There was a way in which all the Hagsgate faces were very much alike, but she could not find it.

"And now," Drinn said when the meal was over, "now you must permit me to explain why we greeted you so uncivilly."

"Pish, no need." Schmendrick chuckled. The wine had made him chuckly and easy, and had brightened his green eyes to gold. "What I want to know is the reason for the rumors that have Hagsgate full of ghouls and werewolves. Most absurd thing I ever heard of."

Drinn smiled. He was a knotty man with a turtle's hard, empty jaws. "It's the same thing," he said. "Listen. The town of Hagsgate is under a curse."

The room was suddenly very still, and in the beery light the faces of the townsfolk looked as tight and pale as cheese. Schmendrick laughed again. "A blessing, you mean. In this bony kingdom of old Haggard's, you are like another land altogether—a spring, an oasis. I agree with you that there's enchantment here, but I drink to it."

Drinn stopped him as he raised his glass. "Not that toast, my friend. Will you drink to a woe fifty years old? It is that long since our sorrow fell, when King Haggard built his castle by the sea."

"When the witch built it, I think." Schmendrick wagged a finger at him. "Credit where it's due, after all."

"Ah, you know that story," Drinn said. "Then you must also know that Haggard refused to pay the witch when her task was completed."

The magician nodded. "Aye, and she cursed him for his greed—cursed the castle, rather. But what had that to do with Hagsgate? The town had done the witch no wrong."

"No," Drinn replied. "But neither had it done her any good. She could not unmake the castle—or would not, for she fancied herself an artistic sort and boasted that her work was years ahead of its time. Anyway, she came to the elders of Hagsgate and demanded that they force Haggard to pay what was due her. 'Look at me and see yourselves,' she rasped. 'That's the true test of a town, or of a king. A lord who cheats an ugly old witch will cheat his own folk by and by. Stop him while you can, before you grow used to him.' " Drinn sipped his wine and thoughtfully filled Schmendrick's glass once more.

"Haggard paid her no money," he went on, "and Hagsgate, alas, paid her no heed. She was treated politely and referred to the proper authorities, whereupon she flew into a fury and screamed that in our eagerness to make no enemies at all, we had now made two." He paused, covering his eyes with lids so thin that Molly was sure he could see through them, like a bird. With his eyes closed, he said, "It was then that she cursed Haggard's castle, and cursed our town as well. Thus his greed brought ruin upon us all."

In the sighing silence, Molly Grue's voice came down like a hammer on a horseshoe, as though she were again berating poor Captain Cully. "Haggard's less at fault than you yourselves," she mocked the folk of Hagsgate, "for he was only one thief, and you were many. You earned your trouble by your own avarice, not your king's."

Drinn opened his eyes and gave her an angry look. "*We* earned nothing," he protested. "It was our parents and grandparents whom the witch asked for help, and I'll grant you that they were as much to blame as Haggard, in their way. We would have handled the matter quite differently." And every middle-aged face in the room scowled at every older face.

One of the old men spoke up in a voice that wheezed and miaowed. "You would have done just as we did. There were crops to harvest and stock to tend, as there still is. There was Haggard to live with, as there still is. We know very well how you would have behaved. You are our children."

Drinn glowered him down, and other men began to shout spitefully, but the magician quieted them all by asking, "What was the curse? Could it have anything to do with the Red Bull?"

The name rang coldly, even in the bright room, and Molly felt suddenly lonely. On an impulse, she added her own question, though it had nothing to do with the conversation. "Have any of you ever seen a unicorn?"

It was then that she learned two things: the difference between silence and utter silence; and that she had been quite right to ask that question. The Hagsgate faces tried not to move but they did move. Drinn said carefully, "We never see the Bull, and we never speak of him. Nothing that concerns him can be any business of ours. As for unicorns, there are none. There never were." He poured the black wine again. "I will tell you the words of the curse," he said. He folded his hands before him, and began to chant.

"You whom Haggard holds in thrall,
Share his feasts and share his fall.
You shall see your fortune flower
Till the torrent takes the tower.
Yet none but one of Hagsgate town
May bring the castle swirling down."

A few others joined in as he recited the old malediction. Their voices were sad and far, as though they were not in the room at all but were tumbling in the wind high over the inn's chimney, helpless as dead leaves.

What is it about their faces? Molly wondered. I almost know. The magician sat silently by her, rolling his wine glass in his long hands.

"When those words were first spoken," Drinn said, "Haggard had not been long in the country, and all of it was still soft and blooming—all but the town of Hagsgate. Hagsgate was then as this land has become: a scrabbly, bare place where men put great stones on the roofs of their huts to keep them from blowing away." He grinned bitterly at the older men. "Crops to harvest, stock to tend! You grew cabbages and rutabagas and a few pale potatoes, and in all of Hagsgate there was but one weary cow. Strangers thought the town accursed, having offended some vindictive witch or other."

Molly felt the unicorn go by in the street, then turn and come back, restless as the torches on the walls that bowed and wriggled. She wanted to run out to her, but instead she asked quietly, "And afterward, when that had come true?"

Drinn answered, "From that moment, we have known nothing but bounty. Our grim earth has grown so kind that gardens and orchards spring up by themselves—we need neither to plant nor to tend them. Our flocks multiply; our craftsmen become more clever in their sleep; the air we breathe and the water we drink keep us from ever knowing illness. All sorrow parts to go around us—and this has come about while the rest of the realm, once so green, has shriveled to cinders under Haggard's hand. For fifty years, none but he and we have prospered. It is as though all others had been cursed."

" 'Share his feast and share his fall.' " Schmendrick murmured. "I see, I see." He gulped another glass of the black wine, and laughed. "But old King Haggard still rules, and will until the sea overflows. You don't know what a real curse is. Let me tell you *my* troubles." Easy tears suddenly glittered in his eyes. "To begin with, my mother never liked me. She pretended, but I knew—"

Drinn interrupted him, and just then Molly realized what was strange about the folk of Hagsgate. Every one of them was well and warmly dressed, but the faces that peered out of their fine clothes were the faces of poor people, cold as ghosts and too hungry to eat. Drinn said, " 'Yet none but one of Hagsgate town may bring the castle swirling down.' How can we delight in our good fortune when we know that it must end, and that one of us will end it? Every day makes us richer, and brings us one day nearer to our doom. Magician, for fifty years we have lived leanly, avoided attachments, untied all habits, readying ourselves for the sea. We have taken not a moment's joy in our wealth—or in anything else—for joy is just one more thing to lose. Pity Hagsgate, strangers, for in all the wretched world there can be no town more unhappy."

"Lost, lost, lost," the townsfolk whimpered. "Misery, misery we." Molly Grue stared wordlessly at them, but Schmendrick said respectfully, "That's a *good* curse, that's a professional job. I always say, whatever you're having done, go to an expert. It pays in the long run."

Drinn frowned, and Molly nudged Schmendrick. The magician blinked. "Oh. Well, what is it you wish of me? I must warn you that I am not a very skillful sorcerer, but I will be glad to lift this curse from you, if I can."

"I had not taken you for any more than you are," Drinn answered, "but such as you are, you should do as well as any. I think we will leave the curse the way it is. If it were lifted we might not become poor again, but we would no longer grow steadily richer, and that would be just as bad. No, our real task is to keep Haggard's tower from falling, and since the hero who will destroy it can only come from Hagsgate, this should not be impossible. For one thing, we allow no strangers to settle here. We keep them away, by force if we must, but more often by guile. Those dark tales of Hagsgate that you spoke of—we invented them ourselves, and spread them as widely as we could to make certain that we would have few visitors." He smiled proudly with his hollow jaws.

Schmendrick propped his chin on his knuckles and regarded Drinn with a sagging smile. "What about your own children?" he asked. "How can you keep one of them from growing up to fulfill the curse?" He looked around the inn, sleepily studying every wrinkled face that looked back at him. "Come to think of it," he said slowly, "are there no young people in this town? How early do you send children to bed in Hagsgate?"

No one answered him. Molly could hear blood creaking in ears and eyes, and skin twitching like water plucked by the wind. Then Drinn said, "We have no children. We have had none since the day that the curse was laid upon us." He coughed into his fist and added, "It seemed the most obvious way of foiling the witch."

Schmendrick threw back his head and laughed without making a sound, laughed to make the torches dance. Molly realized that the magician was quite drunk. Drinn's mouth disappeared, and his eyes hardened into cracked porcelain. "I see no humor in our plight," he said softly. "None at all."

"None," Schmendrick gurgled, bowing over the table and spilling his wine. "None, pardon me, none, none at all." Under the angry gaze of two hundred eyes, he managed to recover himself and reply seriously to Drinn. "Then it would seem to me that you have no worries. None that would worry you, anyway." A small whee of laughter sneaked out between his lips, like steam from a teakettle.

"So it would seem," Drinn leaned forward and touched Schmendrick's wrist with two fingers. "But I have not told you all the truth. Twenty-one years ago, a child was born in Hagsgate. Whose child it was, we never knew. I found it myself, as I was crossing the marketplace one winter's night. It was lying on a butcher's block, not crying, although there was snow, but warm and chuckling under a comforter of stray cats. They were all purring together, and the sound was heavy with knowledge. I stood by the strange cradle for a long time, pondering while the snow fell and the cats purred prophecy."

He stopped, and Molly Grue said eagerly, "You took the child home with you, of course, and raised it as your own." Drinn laid his hands palm up on the table.

"I chased the cats away," he said, "and went home alone." Molly's face turned the color of mist. Drinn shrugged slightly. "I know the birth of a hero when I see it," he said. "Omens and portents, snakes in the nursery. Had it not been for the cats, I might have chanced the child, but they made it so obvious, so mythological. What was I to do—knowingly harbor Hagsgate's doom?" His lip twitched, as though a hook had set in it. "As it happens, I erred, but it was on the side of tenderness. When I returned at sunrise, the baby had vanished."

Schmendrick was drawing pictures with his finger in a puddle of wine, and might have heard nothing at all. Drinn went on. "Naturally, no one ever admitted to leaving the child in the marketplace, and though we searched every house from cellar to dovecote, we never found it again. I might have concluded that wolves had taken the brat, or even that I had dreamed the whole encounter, cats and all—but for the fact that on the very next day a herald of King Haggard's came riding into town, ordering us to rejoice. After thirty years of waiting, the king had a son at last." He looked away from the look on Molly's face. "Our foundling, incidentally, was a boy."

Schmendrick licked the tip of his finger and looked up, "Lír," he said thoughtfully. "Prince Lír. But there was no other way to account for his appearance?"

"Not likely," Drinn snorted. "Any woman that would marry Haggard, even Haggard would refuse. He gave out the tale that the boy was a nephew, whom he graciously adopted on the death of his parents. But Haggard has no relatives, no family. There are those who say that he was born of an overcast, as Venus was born out of the sea. No one would give King Haggard a child to raise."

The magician calmly held out his glass, and filled it himself when Drinn refused. "Well, he got one somewhere, and good for him. But how could he have come by your little cat-baby?"

Drinn said, "He walks in Hagsgate at night, not often, but now and then. Many of us have seen him—tall Haggard, gray as driftwood, prowling alone under an iron moon, picking up dropped coins, broken dishes, spoons, stones, handkerchiefs, rings, stepped-on apples; anything, everything, no reason to it. It was Haggard who took the child. I am as certain of it as I am certain that Prince Lír is the one who will topple the tower and sink Haggard and Hagsgate together."

"I hope he is," Molly broke in. "I hope Prince Lír is that baby you left to die, and I hope he drowns your town, and I hope the fish nibble you bare as corncobs—"

Schmendrick kicked her ankle as hard as he could, for the listeners were beginning to hiss like embers, and a few were rising to their feet. He asked again, "What is it you wish of me?"

"You are on your way to Haggard's castle, I believe." Schmendrick nodded. "Ah," Drinn said. "Now, a clever magician would find it simple to become friendly with Prince Lír, who is reputed to be a young man of eagerness and curiosity. A clever magician might be acquainted with all manner of odd potions and powders, poppets and philters, herbs and banes and unguents. A clever magician—mind you, I said 'clever,' no more —a clever magician might be able, under the proper circumstances . . ." He let the rest drift away unspoken, but no less said.

"For a meal?" Schmendrick stood up, knocking his chair over. He leaned on the table with both hands, breathing harshly. "Is that the going rate these days? Dinner and wine the price of a poisoned prince? You'll have to do better than that, friend Drinn. I wouldn't do in a chimneysweep for such a fee."

Molly Grue gripped his arm, crying, "What are you saying?" The magician shook her hand away, but at the same time he lowered one eyelid in a slow wink. Drinn leaned back in his chair, smiling. "I never haggle with a professional," he said. "Twenty-five pieces of gold."

They haggled for half an hour, Schmendrick demanding a hundred gold pieces, and Drinn refusing to offer more than forty. At last they settled at seventy, half to be paid then and half upon Schmendrick's successful return. Drinn counted out the money on the spot from a leather pouch at his belt. "You'll spend the night in Hagsgate, of course," he said. "I would be pleased to put you up myself."

But the magician shook his head. "I think not. We will go on to the castle, since we're so near it now. The sooner there, the sooner back, eh?" And he grinned a crafty and conspiratorial grin.

"Haggard's castle is always dangerous," Drinn warned. "But it is never more dangerous than at night."

"They say that about Hagsgate too," Schmendrick replied. "You mustn't believe everything you hear, Drinn." He walked to the door of the inn, and Molly followed him. There he turned and beamed at the folk of Hagsgate, hunched in their finery. "I would like to leave you with this last thought," he told them. "The most professional curse ever snarled or croaked or thundered can have no effect on a pure heart. Good night."

Outside, the night lay coiled in the street, cobra-cold and scaled with stars. There was no moon. Schmendrick stepped out boldly, chuckling to himself and jingling his gold coins. Without looking at Molly, he said, "Suckers. To assume so lightly that all magicians dabble in death. Now if they had wanted me to lift the curse—ah, I might have done that for no more than the meal. I might have done it for a single glass of wine."

"I'm glad you didn't," Molly said savagely. "They deserve their fate, they deserve worse. To leave a child out in the snow—"

"Well, if they hadn't, he couldn't have grown up to be a prince. Haven't you ever been in a fairy tale before?" The magician's voice was kind and drunken, and his eyes were as bright as his new money. "The hero has to make a prophecy come true, and the villain is the one who has to stop him—though in another kind of story, it's more often the other way around. And a hero has to be in trouble from the moment of his birth, or he's not a real hero. It's a great relief to find out about Prince Lír. I've been waiting for this tale to turn up a leading man."

The unicorn was there as a star is suddenly there, moving a little way ahead of them, a sail in the dark. Molly said, "If Lír is the hero, what is she?"

"That's different. Haggard and Lír and Drinn and you and I—we are in a fairy tale, and must go where it goes. But she is real. She is real." Schmendrick yawned and hiccupped and shivered all at once. "We'd better hurry," he said. "Perhaps we should have stayed the night, but old Drinn makes me nervous. I'm sure I deceived him completely, but all the same."

It seemed to Molly, dreaming and waking as she walked, that Hagsgate was stretching itself like a paw to hold the three of them back, curling around them and batting them gently back and forth, so that they trod in their own tracks over and over. In a hundred years they reached the last house and the end of the town; in another fifty years they had blundered through the damp fields, the vineyards, and the crouching orchards. Molly dreamed that sheep leered at them from treetops, and that cold cows stepped on their feet and shoved them off the withering path. But the light of the unicorn sailed on ahead, and Molly followed it, awake or asleep.

King Haggard's castle was stalking in the sky, a blind black bird that fished the valley by night. Molly could hear the breathing of its wings. Then the unicorn's breath stirred in her hair, and she heard Schmendrick asking, "How many men?"

"Three men," the unicorn said. "They have been behind us since we left Hagsgate, but now they are coming swiftly. Listen."

Steps too soft for their quickness; voices too muffled to mean any good. The magician rubbed his eyes. "Perhaps Drinn has started to feel guilty about underpaying his poisoner," he murmured. "Perhaps his conscience is keeping him awake. Anything is possible. Perhaps I have feathers." He took Molly by the arm and pulled her down into a hard hollow by the side of the road. The unicorn lay nearby, still as moonlight.

Daggers gleaming like fishtrails on a dark sea. A voice, suddenly loud and angry. "I tell you, we've lost them. We passed them a mile back, where I heard that rustling. I'm damned if I'll run any farther."

"Be still!" a second voice whispered fiercely. "Do you want them to escape and betray us? You're afraid of the magician, but you'd do better to be afraid of the Red Bull. If Haggard finds out about our half of the curse, he'll send the Bull to trample us all into crumbs."

The first man answered in a softer tone. "It isn't that I'm afraid. A magician without a beard is no magician at all. But we're wasting our time. They left the road and cut across country as soon as they knew we were following. We could chase along here all night and never come up with them."

Another voice, wearier than the first two. "We have chased them all night. Look over there. Dawn is coming."

Molly found that she had wriggled halfway under Schmendrick's black cloak and buried her face in a clump of spiny dead grass. She dared not raise her head, but she opened her eyes and saw that the air was growing strangely light. The second man said, "You're a fool. It's a good two hours to morning, and besides, we're heading west."

"In that case," the third voice replied, "I'm going home."

Footsteps started briskly back up the road. The first man called, "Wait, don't go! Wait, I'll go with you!" To the second man, he muttered hastily, "I'm not going home, I just want to retrace our trail a little way. I still think I heard them, and I've dropped my tinderbox somewhere . . ." Molly could hear him edging off as he spoke.

"Damn you for cowards!" the second man swore. "Wait a moment then, will you wait till I try what Drinn told me?" The retreating footsteps hesitated, and he chanted loudly: " 'Warmer than summer, more filling than food, sweeter than woman and dearer than blood—' "

"Hurry," the third voice said. "Hurry. Look at the sky. What is this nonsense?"

Even the second man's voice was growing nervous. "It isn't nonsense. Drinn treats his money so well that it cannot bear to be parted from him. Most touching relationship you ever saw. This is the way he calls to it." He went on rapidly, quavering a little. " 'Stronger than water and kinder than dove. Say the name of the one you love.' "

"Drinn," rang the gold coins in Schmendrick's purse, "drinndrinndrinndrinn." Then everything happened.

The ragged black cloak whipped against Molly's cheek as Schmendrick rolled to his knees, groping desperately for the purse. It buzzed like a rattlesnake in his hand. He hurled it far into the brush, but the three men were running at them together, daggers as red as though they had already been struck. Beyond King Haggard's castle, a burning brightness was rising, breaking into the night like a great shoulder. The magician stood erect, menacing the attackers with demons, metamorphoses, paralyzing ailments, and secret judo holds. Molly picked up a rock.

With an old, gay, terrible cry of ruin, the unicorn reared out of her hiding place. Her hoofs came slashing down like a rain of razors, her mane raged, and on her forehead she wore a plume of lightning. The three assassins dropped their daggers and hid their faces, and even Molly Grue and Schmendrick cowered before her. But the unicorn saw none of them. Mad, dancing, sea-white, she belled her challenge again.

And the brightness answered her with a bellow like the sound of ice breaking up in the spring. Drinn's men fled, stumbling and shrieking.

Haggard's castle was on fire, tossing wildly in a sudden cold wind. Molly said aloud, "But it has to be the sea, it's supposed to be." She thought that she could see a window, as far away as it was, and a gray face. Then the Red Bull came.

VIII

HE WAS THE COLOR of blood, not the springing blood of the heart but the blood that stirs under an old wound that never really healed. A terrible light poured from him like sweat, and his roar started landslides flowing into one another. His horns were as pale as scars.

For one moment the unicorn faced him, frozen as a wave about to break. Then the light of her horn went out, and she turned and fled. The Red Bull bellowed again, and leaped down after her.

The unicorn had never been afraid of anything. She was immortal, but she could be killed: by a harpy, by a dragon or a chimera, by a stray arrow loosed at a squirrel. But dragons could only kill her—they could never make her forget what she was, or themselves forget that even dead she would still be more beautiful than they. The Red Bull did not know her, and yet she could feel that it was herself he sought, and no white mare. Fear blew her dark then, and she ran away, while the Bull's raging ignorance filled the sky and spilled over into the valley.

The trees lunged at her, and she veered wildly among them; she who slipped so softly through eternity without bumping into anything. Behind her they were breaking like glass in the rush of the Red Bull. He roared once again, and a great branch clubbed her on the shoulder so hard that she staggered and fell. She was up immediately, but now roots humped under her feet as she ran, and others burrowed as busily as moles to cut across the path. Vines struck at her like strangling snakes, creepers wove webs between the trees, dead boughs crashed all around her. She fell a second time. The Bull's hoofs on the earth boomed through her bones, and she cried out.

She must have found some way out of the trees, for she was running on the hard, bald plain that lay beyond the prosperous pasture lands of Hagsgate. Now she had room to race, and a unicorn is only loping when she leaves the hunter kicking his burst and sinking horse. She moved with the speed of life, winking from one body to another or running down a sword; swifter than anything burdened with legs or wings. Yet without looking back, she knew that the Red Bull was gaining on her, coming like the moon, the sullen, swollen hunter's moon. She could feel the shock of the livid horns in her side, as though he had already struck.

Ripe, sharp cornstalks leaned together to make a hedge at her breast, but she trampled them down. Silver wheatfields turned cold and gummy when the Bull breathed on them; they dragged at her legs like snow. Still she ran, bleating and defeated, hearing the butterfly's icy chiming: "They passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them." He had killed them all.

Suddenly the Bull was facing her, as though he had been lifted like a chess piece, swooped through the air, and set down again to bar her way. He did not charge immediately, and she did not run. He had been huge when she first fled him, but in the pursuit he had grown so vast that she could not imagine all of him. Now he seemed to curve with the curve of the bloodshot sky, his legs like great whirlwinds, his head rolling like the northern lights. His nostrils wrinkled and rumbled as he searched for her, and the unicorn realized that the Red Bull was blind.

If he had rushed her then, she would have met him, tiny and despairing with her darkened horn, even though he stamped her to pieces. He was swifter than she; better to face him now than to be caught running. But the Bull advanced slowly, with a kind of sinister daintiness, as though he were trying not to frighten her, and again she broke before him. With low, sad cry, she whirled and ran back the way she had come: back through the tattered fields and over the plain, toward King Haggard's castle, dark and hunched as ever. And the Red Bull went after her, following her fear.

Schmendrick and Molly had been spun away like chips when the Bull went by—Molly slammed breathless and witless against the ground, and the magician hurled into a tangle of thorns that cost him half his cloak and an eighth of his skin. They got up when they could, and went limping in pursuit, leaning on one another. Neither one said a word.

The way through the trees was easier for them than the unicorn had found it, for the Red Bull had been there since. Molly and the magician scrambled over great treetrunks not only smashed but trodden halfway into the ground, and dropped to hands and knees to crawl around crevasses they could not fathom in the dark. No hoofs could have made these, Molly thought dazedly; the earth had torn itself shrinking from the burden of the Bull. She thought of the unicorn, and her heart paled.

When they came out on the plain, they saw her—far and faint, a tuft of white water on the wind, almost invisible in the glare of the Red Bull. Molly Grue, a little crazy with weariness and fear, saw them moving the way stars and stones move through space: forever falling, forever following, forever alone. The Red Bull would never catch the unicorn, not until Now caught up with New, Bygone with Begin. Molly smiled serenely.

But the blazing shadow loomed over the unicorn until the Bull seemed to be all around her. She reared, swerved, and sprang away in another direction, only to meet the Bull there, his head lowered and his jaws drooling thunder. Again she turned, and again, backing and sidling, making crafty little dashes to this side or that; and each time the Red Bull headed her off by standing still. He did not attack, but he left her no way to go, save one.

"He's driving her," Schmendrick said quietly. "If he wanted to kill her, he could have done it by now. He's driving her the way he drove the others—to the castle, to Haggard. I wonder why."

Molly said, "Do something." Her voice was strangely calm and casual, and the magician answered her in the same tone.

"There is nothing I can do."

The unicorn fled once more, pitifully tireless, and the Red Bull let her have room to run, but none to turn. When she faced him for a third time, she was close enough for Molly to see her hind legs shivering like those of a frightened dog. Now she set herself to stand, pawing the ground wickedly and laying back her small, lean ears. But she could make no sound, and her horn did not grow bright again. She cowered when the Red Bull's bellow made the sky ripple and crack, and yet she did not back away.

"Please," Molly Grue said. "Please do something."

Schmendrick turned on her, and his face was wild with helplessness. "What can I do? What can I do, with my magic? Hat tricks, penny tricks, or the one where I scramble stones to make an omelet? Would that entertain the Red Bull, do you think, or shall I try the trick with the singing oranges? I'll try whatever you suggest, for I would certainly be happy to be of some practical use."

Molly did not answer him. The Bull came on, and the unicorn crouched lower and lower, until she seemed about to snap in two. Schmendrick said, "I know what to do. If I could, I'd change her into some other creature, some beast too humble for the Bull to be concerned with. But only a great magician, a wizard like Nikos, who was my teacher, would have that kind of power. To transform a unicorn—anyone who could do that could juggle the seasons and shuffle years like playing cards. And I have no more power than you have; less, for you can touch her, and I cannot." Then he said suddenly, "Look. It is over."

The unicorn was standing very still before the Red Bull, her head down and her whiteness drabbled to a soapy gray. She looked gaunt and small; and even Molly, who loved her, could not keep from seeing that a unicorn is an absurd animal when the shining has gone out of her. Tail like a lion's tail, deerlegs, goatfeet, the mane cold and fine as foam over my hand, the charred horn, the eyes—oh the eyes! Molly took hold of Schmendrick's arm and dug her nails into it as hard as she could.

"You have magic," she said. She heard her own voice, as deep and clear as a sibyl's. "Maybe you can't find it, but it's there. You called up Robin Hood, and there is no Robin Hood, but he came, and he was real. And that is magic. You have all the power you need, if you dare to look for it."

Schmendrick regarded her in silence, staring as hard as though his green eyes were beginning the search for his magic in Molly Grue's eyes. The Bull stepped lightly toward the unicorn, no longer pursuing, but commanding her with the weight of his presence, and she moved ahead of him, docile, obedient. He followed like a sheepdog, guiding her in the direction of King Haggard's jagged tower and the sea.

"Oh, please!" Molly's voice was crumbling now. "Please, it's not fair, it can't be happening. He'll drive her to Haggard, and no one will ever see her again, no one. Please, you're a magician, you won't let him." Her fingers struck even deeper into Schmendrick's arm. "Do something!" She wept. "Don't let him, do something!"

Schmendrick was prying futilely at her clenched fingers. "I'm not going to do a damn thing," he said through his teeth, "until you let go of my arm."

"Oh," Molly said. "I'm sorry."

"You can cut off the circulation like that, you know," the magician said severely. He rubbed his arm and took a few steps forward, into the path of the Red Bull. There he stood with his arms folded and his head high, though it dropped now and then, because he was very tired.

"Maybe this time," Molly heard him mutter, "maybe this time. Nikos said—what was it that Nikos said? I don't remember. It has been so long." There was an odd, old sorrow in his voice that Molly had never heard before. Then a gaiety leaped up like a flame as he said, "Well, who knows, who knows? If this is not the time, perhaps I can make it so. There's this much of comfort, friend Schmendrick. For once, I don't see how you can possibly make things any worse than they already are," and he laughed softly.

The Red Bull, being blind, took no notice of the tall figure in the road until he was almost upon it. Then he halted, sniffing the air; storm stirring in his throat, but a certain confusion showing in the swing of his great head. The unicorn stopped when he stopped, and Schmendrick's breath broke to see her so tractable. "Run!" he called to her. "Run now!" but she never looked at him, or back at the Bull, or at anything but the ground.

At the sound of Schmendrick's voice, the Bull's rumble grew louder and more menacing. He seemed eager to be out of the valley with the unicorn, and the magician thought he knew why. Beyond the towering brightness of the Red Bull, he could see two or three sallow stars and a cautious hint of a warmer light. Dawn was near.

"He doesn't care for daylight," Schmendrick said to himself. "That's worth knowing." Once more he shouted to the unicorn to fly, but his only answer came in the form of a roar like a drumroll. The unicorn bolted forward, and Schmendrick had to spring out of her way, or she would have run him down. Close behind her came the bull, driving her swiftly now, as the wind drives the thin, torn mist. The power of his passage picked Schmendrick up and dropped him elsewhere, tumbling and rolling to keep from being trampled, his eyes jarred blind and his head full of flames. He thought he heard Molly Grue scream.

Scrabbling to one knee, he saw that the Red Bull had herded the unicorn almost to the beginning of the trees. If she would only try one more time to escape—but she was the Bull's and not her own. The magician had one glimpse of her, pale and lost between the pale horns, before the wild red shoulders surged across his sight. Then, swaying and sick and beaten, he closed his eyes and let his hopelessness march through him, until something woke somewhere that had wakened in him once before. He cried aloud, for fear and joy.

What words the magic spoke this second time, he never knew surely. They left him like eagles, and he let them go; and when the last one was away, the emptiness rushed back with a thunderclap that threw him on his face. It happened as quickly as that. This time he knew before he picked himself up that the power had been and gone.

Ahead, the Red Bull was standing still, nosing at something on the ground. Schmendrick could not see the unicorn. He went forward as fast as he could, but it was Molly who first drew near enough to see what the Bull was sniffing. She put her fingers in her mouth, like a child.

At the feet of the Red Bull there lay a young girl, spilled into a very small heap of light and shadow. She was naked, and her skin was the color of snow by moonlight. Fine tangled hair, white as a waterfall, came down almost to the small of her back. Her face was hidden in her arms.

"Oh," Molly said. "Oh, what have you done?" and, heedless of any danger, she ran to the girl and knelt beside her. The Red Bull raised his huge, blind head and swung it slowly in Schmendrick's direction. He seemed to be waning and fading as the gray sky grew light, though he still smoldered as savagely bright as crawling lava. The magician wondered what his true size was, and his color, when he was alone.

Once more the Red Bull sniffled at the still form, stirring it with his freezing breath. Then, without a sound, he bounded away into the trees and was gone from sight in three gigantic strides. Schmendrick had a last vision of him as he gained the rim of the valley: no shape at all, but a swirling darkness, the red darkness you see when you close your eyes in pain. The horns had become the two sharpest towers of old King Haggard's crazy castle.

Molly Grue had taken the white girl's head onto her lap, and was whispering over and over, "What have you done?" The girl's face, quiet in sleep and close to smiling, was the most beautiful that Schmendrick had ever seen. It hurt him and warmed him at the same time. Molly smoothed the strange hair, and Schmendrick noticed on the forehead, above and between the closed eyes, a small, raised mark, darker than the rest of the skin. It was neither a scar nor a bruise. It looked like a flower.

"What do you mean, what have I done?" he demanded of the moaning Molly. "Only saved her from the Bull by magic, that's what I've done. By magic, woman, by my own true magic!" Now he was helpless with delight, for he wanted to dance and he wanted to be still; he shook with shouting and speeches, and yet there was nothing that he wanted to say. He ended by laughing foolishly, hugging himself until he gasped, and sprawling down beside Molly as his legs let go.

"Give me your cloak," Molly said. The magician beamed at her, blinking. She reached over and ungently pulled the shredded cloak from her shoulders. Then she wrapped it around the sleeping girl, as much as it would wrap. The girl shone through it like the sun through leaves.

"Doubtless you are wondering how I plan to return her to her proper shape," Schmendrick offered. "Wonder not. The power will come to me when I need it—I know that much now. One day it will come when I call, but that time is not yet." Impulsively he seized Molly Grue, hugging her head in his long arms. "But you were right," he cried, "you were right! It is there, and it is mine!"

Molly pulled away from him, one cheek roughed red and both ears mashed. The girl sighed in her lap, ceased to smile, turned her face from the sunrise. Molly said, "Schmendrick, you poor man, you magician, don't you see—"

"See what? There's nothing to see." But his voice was suddenly hard and wary, and the green eyes were beginning to be frightened. "The Red Bull came for a unicorn, so she had to become something else. You begged me to change her—what is it frets you now?"

Molly shook her head in the wavering way of an old woman. She said, "I didn't know you meant to turn her into a human girl. You would have done better—" She did not finish, but looked away from him. One hand continued to stroke the white girl's hair.

"The magic chose the shape, not I," Schmendrick answered.

"A mountebank may select this cheat or that, but a magician is a porter, a donkey carrying his master where he must. The magician calls, but the magic chooses. If it changes a unicorn to a human being, then that was the only thing to do." His face was fevered with an ardent delirium which made him look even younger. "I am a bearer," he sang. "I am a dwelling, I am a messenger—"

"You are an idiot," Molly Grue said fiercely. "Do you hear me? You're a magician, all right, but you're a stupid magician." But the girl was trying to wake, her hands opening and closing, and her eyelids beating like birds' breasts. As Molly and Schmendrick looked on, the girl made a soft sound and opened her eyes.

They were farther apart than common, and somewhat deeper set, and they were as dark as the deep sea; and illuminated, like the sea, by strange, glimmering creatures that never rise to the surface. The unicorn could have been transformed into a lizard, Molly thought, or into a shark, a snail, a goose, and somehow still her eyes would have given the change away. To me, anyway. I would know.

The girl lay without moving, her eyes finding herself in Molly's eyes, and in Schmendrick's. Then, in one motion, she was on her feet, the black cloak falling back across Molly's lap. For a moment she turned in a circle, staring at her hands, which she held high and useless, close to her breast. She bobbed and shambled like an ape doing a trick, and her face was the silly, bewildered face of a joker's victim. And yet she could make no move that was not beautiful. Her trapped terror was more lovely than any joy that Molly had ever seen, and that was the most terrible thing about it.

"Donkey," Molly said. "Messenger."

"I can change her back," the magician answered hoarsely. "Don't worry about it. I can change her back."

Shining in the sun, the white girl hobbled to and fro on her strong young legs. She stumbled suddenly and fell, and it was a bad fall because she did not know how to catch herself with her hands. Molly flew to her, but the girl crouched on the ground staring at her, and spoke in a low voice. "*What have you done to me?*" Molly Grue began to cry.

Schmendrick came forward, his face cold and wet, but his voice level. "I turned you into a human being to save you from the Red Bull. There was nothing else I could do. I will turn you to yourself again, as soon as I can."

"The Red Bull," the girl whispered. "Ah!" She was trembling wildly, as though something were shaking and hammering at her skin from within. "He was too strong," she said, "too strong. There was no end to his strength, and no beginning. He is older than I."

Her eyes widened, and it seemed to Molly that the Bull moved in them, crossing their depths like a flaming fish, and vanishing. The girl began to touch her face timidly, recoiling from the feel of her own features. Her curled fingers brushed the mark on her forehead, and she closed her eyes and gave a thin, stabbing howl of loss and weariness and utter despair.

"What have you done to me?" she cried. "I will die here!" She tore at the smooth body, and blood followed her fingers. "I will die here! I will die!" Yet there was no fear in her face, though it ramped in her voice, in her hands and feet, in the white hair that fell down over her new body. Her face remained quiet and untroubled.

Molly huddled over her, as near as she dared, begging her not to hurt herself. But Schmendrick said, "Be still," and the two words cracked like autumn branches. He said, "The magic knew what it was doing. Be still and listen."

"Why did you not let the Bull kill me?" The white girl moaned. "Why did you not leave me to the harpy? That would have been kinder than closing me in this cage." The magician winced, remembering Molly Grue's mocking accusation, but he spoke with a desperate calmness.

"In the first place, it's quite an attractive shape," he said. "You couldn't have done much better and still remained human."

She looked at herself: sideways at her shoulders and along her arms, then down her scratched and welting body. She stood on one foot to inspect the sole of the other; cocked her eyes up to see the silver brows, squinted down her cheeks to catch a flash of her nose; and even peered closely at the sea-green veins inside her wrists, themselves as gaily made as young otters. At last she turned her face to the magician, and again he caught his breath. I have made magic, he thought, but sorrow winked sharp in his throat, like a fishhook setting fast.

"All right," he said. "It would make no difference to you if I had changed you into a rhinoceros, which is where the whole silly myth got started. But in this guise you have some chance of reaching King Haggard and finding out what has become of your people. As a unicorn, you would only suffer their fate—unless you think you could defeat the Bull if you met him a second time."

The white girl shook her head. "No," she answered, "never. Another time, I would not stand so long." Her voice was too soft, as though its bones had been broken. She said, "My people are gone, and I will follow them soon, whatever shape you trap me in. But I would have chosen any other than this for my prison. A rhinoceros is as ugly as a human being, and it too is going to die, but at least it never thinks that it is beautiful."

"No, it never thinks that," the magician agreed. "That's why it goes on being a rhinoceros and will never be welcome even at Haggard's court. But a young girl, a girl to whom it can never mean anything that she is not a rhinoceros—such a girl, while the king and his son seek to solve her, might unravel her own riddle until she comes to its end. Rhinoceri are not questing beasts, but young girls are."

The sky was hot and curdled; the sun had already melted into a lion-colored puddle; and on the plain of Hagsgate nothing stirred but the stale, heavy wind. The naked girl with the flower-mark on her forehead stared silently at the green-eyed man, and the woman watched them both. In the tawny morning, King Haggard's castle seemed neither dark nor accursed, but merely grimy, rundown, and poorly designed. Its skinny spires looked nothing like a bull's horns, but rather like those on a jester's cap. Or like the horns of a dilemma, Schmendrick thought. They never have just two.

The white girl said, "I am myself still. This body is dying. I can feel it rotting all around me. How can anything that is going to die be real? How can it be truly beautiful?" Molly Grue put the magician's cloak around her shoulders again, not for modesty or seemliness, but out of a strange pity, as though to keep her from seeing herself.

"I will tell you a story," Schmendrick said. "As a child I was apprenticed to the mightiest magician of all, the great Nikos, whom I have spoken of before. But even Nikos, who could turn cats into cattle, snowflakes into snowdrops, and unicorns into men, could not change me into so much as a carnival cardsharp. At last he said to me, 'My son, your ineptitude is so vast, your incompetence so profound, that I am certain you are inhabited by greater power than I have ever known. Unfortunately, it seems to be working backward at the moment, and even I can find no way to set it right. It must be that you are meant to find your own way to reach your power in time; but frankly, you should live so long as that will take you. Therefore I grant it that you shall not age from this day forth, but will travel the world round and round, eternally inefficient, until at last you come to yourself and know what you are. Don't thank me. I tremble at your doom.' "

The white girl regarded him out of the unicorn's clear, amaranthine eyes—gentle and frightening in the unused face—but she said nothing. It was Molly Grue who asked, "And if you should find your magic—what then?"

"Then the spell will be broken and I will begin to die, as I began at my birth. Even the greatest wizards grow old, like other men, and die." He swayed and nodded, and then snapped awake again: a tall, thin, shabby man, smelling of dust and drink. "I told you that I was older than I look," he said. "I was born mortal, and I have been immortal for a long, foolish time, and one day I will be mortal again; so I know something that a unicorn cannot know. Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world. Do you understand me?"

"No," she said.

The magician smiled wearily. "You will. You're in the story with the rest of us now, and you must go with it, whether you will or no. If you want to find your people, if you want to become a unicorn again, then you must follow the fairy tale to King Haggard's castle, and wherever else it chooses to take you. The story cannot end without the princess."

The white girl said, "I will not go." She stepped away, her body wary and the cold hair falling down. She said, "I am no princess, no mortal, and I will not go. Nothing but evil has happened to me since I left my forest, and nothing but evil can have become of unicorns in this country. Give me my true shape again, and I will return to my trees, to my pool, to my own place. Your tale has no power over me. I am a unicorn. I am the last unicorn."

Had she said that once before, long ago, in the blue-green silence of the trees? Schmendrick continued to smile, but Molly Grue said, "Change her back. You said you could change her. Let her go home."

"I cannot," the magician answered. "I told you, the magic is not mine to command, not yet. That is why I too must go on to the castle, and the fate or fortune that waits there. If I tried to undo the transformation now, I might actually turn her into a rhinoceros. That would be the best thing that could happen. As for the worst—" He shivered and fell silent.

The girl turned from them and looked away at the castle that stooped over the valley. She could see no movement at any window or among the tottering turrets, or any sign of the Red Bull. Yet she knew that he was there, brooding at the castle's roots till night should fall again: strong beyond strength, invincible as the night itself. For a second time she touched the place on her forehead where her horn had been.

When she turned again, they were asleep where they sat, the man and the woman. Their heads were pillowed on air, and their mouths hung open. She stood by them, watching them breathe, one hand holding the black cloak closed at her throat. Very faintly, for the first time, the smell of the sea came to her.

IX

THE SENTINELS saw them coming a little before sunset, when the sea was flat and blinding. The sentinels were pacing the second tallest of the many awry towers that sprouted up from the castle and made it resemble one of those odd trees that grow with their roots in the air. From where they stood, the two men could survey the entire valley of Hagsgate as far as the town and the sharp hills beyond, as well as the road that ran from the rim of the valley to the great, though sagging, front gate of King Haggard's castle.

"A man and two women," said the first sentinel. He hurried to the far side of the tower; a stomach-startling motion, since the tower tilted so that half of the sentinels' sky was sea. The castle sat on the edge of a cliff which dropped like a knife blade to a thin yellow shore, frayed bare over green and black rocks. Soft, baggy birds squatted on the rocks, snickering, "Saidso, saidso."

The second man followed his comrade across the tower at an easier pace. He said, "A man and a woman. The third one, in the cloak—I am not certain of the third." Both men were clad in homemade mail—rings, bottlecaps, and links of chain sewn onto half-cured hides—and their faces were invisible behind rusted visors, but the second sentinel's voice and gait alike marked him as the elder. "The one in the black cloak," he said again. "Do not be too sure of that one too soon."

But the first sentinel leaned out into the orange glare of the tipped-up sea, scraping a few studs loose from his poor armor on the parapet. "It is a woman," he declared. "I would doubt my own sex before hers."

"And well you may," the other observed sardonically, "since you do nothing that becomes a man but ride astraddle. I warn you again: be slow to call that third male or female. Wait a little, and see what you see."

The first sentinel answered him without turning. "If I had grown up never dreaming that there were two separate secrets to the world, if I had taken every woman I met to be exactly like myself, still I would know that this creature was different from anything I had ever seen before. I have always been sorry that I have never pleased you; but now, when I look at her I am sorry that I have never pleased myself. Oh, I am sorry."

He bent still further over the wall, straining his eyes toward the three slow figures on the road. A chuckle clattered behind his visor. "The other woman looks sore-footed and bad-tempered," he reported. "The man appears an amiable sort, though plainly of the strolling life. A minstrel, like enough, or a player." He said nothing more for a long while, watching them draw near.

"And the third?" the older man inquired presently. "Your sundown fancy with the interesting hair? Have you outworn her in a quarter of an hour—already seen her closer than love dares?" His voice rustled in his helmet like small, clawed feet.

"I don't think I could ever see her closely," the sentinel replied, "however close she came." His own voice was hushed and regretful, echoing with lost chances. "She has a newness," he said. "Everything is for the first time. See how she moves, how she walks, how she turns her head—all for the first time, the first time anyone has ever done these things. See how she draws her breath and lets it go again, as though no one else in the world knew that air was good. It is all for her. If I learned that she had been born this very morning, I would only be surprised that she was so old."

The second sentinel stared down from his tower at the three wanderers. The tall man saw him first, and next the dour woman. Their eyes reflected nothing but his armor, grim and cankered and empty. But then the girl in the ruined black cloak raised her head, and he stepped back from the parapet, putting out one tin glove against her glance. In a moment she passed into the shadow of the castle with her companions, and he lowered his hand.

"She may be mad," he said calmly. "No grown girl looks like that unless she is mad. That would be annoying, but far preferable to the remaining possibility."

"Which is?" the younger man prompted after a silence.

"Which is that she was indeed born this morning. I would rather that she were mad. Let us go down now."

When the man and the women reached the castle, the two sentries were standing on either side of the gate, their blunt, bent halberds crossed and their falchions hitched round in front of them. The sun had gone down, and their absurd armor grew steadily more menacing as the sea faded. The travelers hesitated, looking at one another. They had no dark castle at their backs, and their eyes were not hidden.

"Give your names," said the parched voice of the second sentinel.

The tall man stepped a pace forward. "I am Schmendrick the Magician," he said. "This is Molly Grue, my helper—and this is the Lady Amalthea." He stumbled over the name of the white girl, as though he had never before spoken it. "We seek audience with King Haggard," he continued. "We have come a long way to see him."

The second sentinel waited for the first to speak, but the younger man was looking only at the Lady Amalthea. Impatiently he said, "State your business with King Haggard."

"I will," the magician replied, "to Haggard himself. What kind of royal matter could it be that I might confide to doormen and porters? Take us to the king."

"What kind of royal matter could a wandering wizard with a foolish tongue have to discuss with King Haggard?" the second sentinel asked somberly. But he turned and strode through the castle gate, and the king's visitors straggled after him. Last wandered the younger sentinel, his step grown as tender as that of the Lady Amalthea, whose every movement he imitated unaware. She stayed a moment before the gate, looking out to sea, and the sentinel did the same.

His former comrade called angrily to him, but the young sentry was on a different duty, answerable to a new captain for his derelictions. He entered at the gate only after the Lady

Amalthea had chosen to go in. Then he followed, singing to himself in a dreamy drone.

"What is it that is happening to me?
What is it that is happening to me?
I cannot tell whether to be glad or be afraid.
What is it that is happening to me?"

They crossed a cobbled courtyard where cold laundry groped their faces, and passed through a smaller door into a hall so vast that they could not see the walls or the ceiling in the darkness. Great stone pillars rushed up to them as they trudged across the hall, and then leaned away without ever really letting themselves be seen. Breath echoed in that huge place, and the footsteps of other, smaller creatures sounded just as clearly as their own. Molly Grue stayed quite close to Schmendrick.

After the great hall, there came another door and then a thin stair. There were few windows, and no lights. The stair coiled tighter and tighter as it ascended, until it seemed that every step turned round on itself, and that the tower was closing on them all like a sweaty fist. The darkness looked at them and touched them. It had a rainy, doggy smell.

Something rumbled somewhere deep and near. The tower trembled like a ship run aground, and answered with a low, stone wail. The three travelers cried out, scrambling to keep their feet on the shuddering stairs, but their guide pressed on without faltering or speaking. The younger man whispered earnestly to the Lady Amalthea, "It's all right, don't be afraid. It's just the Bull." The sound was not repeated.

The second sentinel halted abruptly, produced a key from a secret place, and jabbed it—apparently—straight into the blank wall. A section of the wall swung inward, and the small procession filed into a low, narrow chamber with one window and a chair at the far end. There was nothing else: no other furnishings, no rug, no draperies, no tapestries. In the room were five people, the tall chair, and the mealy light of the rising new moon.

"This is King Haggard's throne room," said the sentinel.

The magician gripped him by his mailed elbow and turned him until they faced each other. "This is a cell. This is a tomb. No living king sits here. Take us to Haggard, if he is alive."

"You must judge that for yourself," replied the scurrying voice of the sentinel. He unlaced his helmet and lifted it from his gray head. "I am King Haggard," he said.

His eyes were the same color as the horns of the Red Bull. He was taller than Schmendrick, and though his face was bitterly lined there was nothing fond or foolish in it. It was a pike's face: the jaws long and cold, the cheeks hard, the lean neck alive with power. He might have been seventy years old, or eighty, or more.

The first sentinel came forward now with his own helmet under his arm. Molly Grue gaped when she saw his face, for it was the friendly, rumpled face of the young prince who had read a magazine while his princess tried to call a unicorn. King Haggard said, "This is Lír."

"Hi," said Prince Lír. "Glad to meet you." His smile wriggled at their feet like a hopeful puppy, but his eyes—a deep, shadowy blue behind stubby lashes—rested quietly on the eyes of the Lady Amalthea. She looked back at him, silent as a jewel, seeing him no more truly than men see unicorns. But the prince felt strangely, happily certain that she had looked him round and through, and down into caverns that he had never known were there, where her glance echoed and sang. Prodigies began to waken somewhere southwest of his twelfth rib, and he himself—still mirroring the Lady Amalthea—began to shine.

"What is your concern with me?"

Schmendrick the Magician cleared his throat and bowed to the pale-eyed old man. "We seek to enter your service. Far and wide has the fabled court of King Haggard—"

"I need no servants." The king turned away, his face and body suddenly slack with indifference. Yet Schmendrick sensed a curiosity lingering in the stone-colored skin and at the roots of the gray hair. He said cautiously, "But surely you keep some suite, some following. Simplicity is the richest adornment of a king, I grant you, but for such a king as Haggard—"

"You are losing my interest," the rustling voice interrupted him again, "and that is very dangerous. In a moment I will have forgotten you quite entirely, and will never be able to remember just what I did with you. What I forget not only ceases to exist, but never really existed in the first place." As he said this, his eyes, like those of his son, turned to meet the Lady Amalthea's eyes.

"My court," he continued, "since you choose to call it that, consists of four men-at-arms. I would do without them if I could, for they cost more than they are worth, like everything else. But they take their turns as sentries, and as cooks, and they give the appearance of an army, from a distance. What other attendants should I need?"

"But the pleasures of court," the magician cried, "the music, the talk, the women and the fountains, the hunts and the masques and the great feasts—"

"They are nothing to me," King Haggard said. "I have known them all, and they have not made me happy. I will keep nothing near me that does not make me happy."

The Lady Amalthea moved quietly past him to the window, and looked out at the night sea.

Schmendrick came about to catch the wind again, and declared, "I understand you perfectly! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to you all the uses of this world! You are bored with bliss, satiated with sensation, jaded with jejune joys. It is a king's affliction, and therefore no one wants the services of a magician more than a king does. For only to a magician is the world forever fluid, infinitely mutable and eternally new. Only he knows the secret of change, only he knows truly that all things are crouched in eagerness to become something else, and it is from this universal tension that he draws his power. To a magician, March is May, snow is green, and grass is gray; this is that, or whatever you say. Get a magician today!"

He finished on one knee with both arms flung wide. King Haggard stepped nervously away from him, muttering, "Get up, get up, you make my head hurt. Besides, I already have a royal magician."

Schmendrick rose heavily to his feet, his face red and empty. "You never said. What is his name?"

"He is called Mabruk," King Haggard replied. "I do not often speak of him. Even my men-at-arms do not know that he lives here in the castle. Mabruk is all that you have said a wizard should be, and much more that I doubt you dream of. He is known in his trade as 'the magician's magician.' I can see no reason to replace him with some vagrant, nameless, clownish—"

"Ah, but I can!" Schmendrick broke in desperately. "I can think of one reason, uttered by you yourself not a minute since. This marvelous Mabruk does not make you happy."

Over the king's fierce face there fell a slow shadow of disappointment and betrayal. For a breath, he looked like a bewildered young man. "Why no, that is true," King Haggard murmured. "Mabruk's magic has not delighted me for a long time. How long has it been, I wonder?" He clapped his hands briskly, crying out, "Mabruk! Mabruk! Appear, Mabruk!"

"I am here," said a deep voice from a far corner of the room. An old man in a dark, spangled gown and a pointed, spangled hat was standing there, and no one could say surely that he had not been standing there in plain sight since they entered the throne room. His beard and brows were white, and the cast of his face was mild and wise, but his eyes were as hard as hailstones. "What does Your Majesty wish of me?"

"Mabruk," King Haggard said, "this gentleman is of your fraternity. His name is Schmendrick."

The old wizard's icy eyes widened slightly, and he peered at the shabby man. "Why, so it is!" he exclaimed in seeming pleasure. "Schmendrick, my dear boy, how nice to see you! You won't remember me, but I was a dear, dear friend of your tutor, dear old Nikos. He had such high hopes for you, the poor man. Well, well, this is a surprise! And are you really still in the profession? My, you're a determined fellow! I always say perseverance is nine-tenths of any art—not that it's much help to be nine-tenths an artist, of course. But what can it be that brings you here?"

"He has come to take your place." King Haggard's voice was flat and final. "He is now my royal magician."

Smendrick's start of amazement was not lost on old Mabruk, though the wizard himself seemed little surprised by the king's decision. For a moment he obviously considered the worth of wrath, but instead he chose a tone of genial amusement. "As your Majesty wills it, now and always," he purred. "But perhaps Your Majesty might be interested in learning a bit of the history of his new magician. I'm sure dear Schmendrick won't mind my mentioning that he is already something of a legend in the trade. Indeed, among adepts, he is best remembered as 'Nikos's Folly.' His charming and complete inability to master the simplest rune; his creative way with the most childish rhyme of theurgy, let alone—"

King Haggard made a thin motion with the edge of one hand, and Mabruk was suddenly silent. Prince Lír giggled. The king said, "I do not need to be persuaded of his unfitness for the position. A single glance at him tells me that, as a glance makes it plain that you are one of the great wizards of the world." Mabruk swelled gently, fondling his glorious beard and wrinkling his benign brow.

"But that also is nothing to me," King Haggard went on. "In the past, you have performed whatever miracle I required of you, and all it has done has been to spoil my taste for miracles. No task is too vast for your powers—and yet, when the wonder is achieved, nothing has changed. It must be that great power cannot give me whatever it is that I really want. A master magician has not made me happy. I will see what an incompetent one can do. You may go, Mabruk." He nodded his head to dismiss the old wizard.

Mabruk's semblance of affability vanished like a spark on snow, and with the same sound. His whole face became like his eyes. "I am not packed off as easily as that," he said very softly. "Not on a whim, even a king's whim, and not in favor of a fool. Beware, Haggard! Mabruk is no one to anger lightly."

A wind began to rise in the dark chamber. It came as much from one place as another—through the window, through the half-open door—but its true source was the clenched figure of the wizard. The wind was cold and rank, a wet, hooty marsh wind, and it leaped here and there in the room like a gleeful animal discovering the flimsiness of human beings. Molly Grue shrank against Schmendrick, who looked uncomfortable. Prince Lír fidgeted his sword in and out of its sheath.

Even King Haggard gave back a step before the triumphant grin of old Mabruk. The walls of the room seemed to thaw and run away, and the wizard's starry gown became the huge, howling night. Mabruk spoke no word himself, but the wind was beginning to make a wicked, grunting sound as it gained strength. In another moment it would become visible, burst into shape. Schmendrick opened his mouth, but if he were shouting a counterspell it could not be heard, and it did not work.

In the darkness, Molly Grue saw the Lady Amalthea turning far away, stretching out a hand on which the ring and middle fingers were of equal length. The strange place on her forehead was glowing as bright as a flower.

Then the wind was gone as though it had never been, and the stone walls were around them once more, the dull chamber as gay as noon after Mabruk's night. The wizard was crouched almost to the floor, staring at the Lady Amalthea. His wise, benevolent face looked like the face of a drowned man, and his beard dripped thinly from his chin, like stagnant water. Prince Lír took him by the arm.

"Come on, old man," he said, not unkindly. "This way out, granddad. I'll write you a reference."

"I am going," Mabruk said. "Not from fear of you—you lump of stale dough—nor of your mad, ungrateful father; nor of your new magician, much happiness may you have of him." His eyes met King Haggard's hungry eyes, and he laughed like a goat.

"Haggard, I would not be you for all the world," he declared. "You have let your doom in the front door, though it will not depart that way. I would explain myself more fully, but I am no longer in your service. That is a pity, for there will come a time when none but a master will be able to save you—and in that hour, you will have Schmendrick to call upon! Farewell, poor Haggard, farewell!"

Still laughing, he disappeared; but his mirth dwelled forever in the corners of that chamber, like the smell of smoke, or of old, cold dust.

"Well," said King Haggard in the gray moonlight. "Well." He came slowly toward Schmendrick and Molly, his feet silent, his head weaving almost playfully. "Stand still," he commanded when they moved. "I want to see your faces."

His breath rasped like a knife on a grindstone as he peered from one of them to the other. "Closer!" he grumbled, squinting through the dark. "Come closer—closer! I want to see you."

"Light a light then," said Molly Grue. The calmness of her own voice frightened her more than the fury of the old wizard had. It is easy to be brave for *her* sake, she thought, but if I begin being brave on my own account, where will it end?

"I never light lights," the king replied. "What is the good of light?"

He turned from them, muttering to himself, "One face is almost guileless, almost foolish, but not quite foolish enough. The other is a face like my face, and that must mean danger. Yet I saw all that at the gate—why did I let them enter, then? Mabruk was right; I have grown old and daft and easy. Still, I see only Haggard when I look in their eyes."

Prince Lír stirred nervously as the king paced across the throne room toward the Lady Amalthea. She was again gazing out of the window, and King Haggard had drawn very near before she wheeled swiftly, lowering her head in a curious manner. "I will not touch you," he said, and she stood still.

"Why do you linger at the window?" he demanded. "What are you looking at?"

"I am looking at the sea," said the Lady Amalthea. Her voice was low and tremorous; not with fear, but with life, as a new butterfly shivers in the sun.

"Ah," said the king. "Yes, the sea is always good. There is nothing that I can look at for very long, except the sea." Yet he stared at the Lady Amalthea's face for a long time, his own face giving back none of her light—as Prince Lír's had—but taking it in and keeping it somewhere. His breath was as musty as the wizard's wind, but the Lady Amalthea never moved.

Suddenly he shouted, "What is the matter with your eyes? They are full of green leaves, crowded with trees and streams and small animals. Where am I? Why can I not see myself in your eyes?"

The Lady Amalthea did not answer him. King Haggard swung around to face Schmendrick and Molly. His scimitar smile laid its cold edge along their throats. "Who is she?" he demanded.

Schmendrick coughed several times. "The Lady Amalthea is my niece," he offered. "I am her only living relative, and so her guardian. No doubt the state of her attire puzzles you, but it is easily explained. On our journey, we were attacked by bandits and robbed of all our—"

"What nonsense are you jabbering? What about her attire?" The king turned again to regard the white girl, and Schmendrick suddenly understood that neither King Haggard nor his son had noticed that she was naked under the rags of his cloak. The lady Amalthea held herself so gracefully that she made shreds and tatters seem the only fitting dress for a princess; and besides, she did not know that she was naked. It was the armored king who seemed bare before her.

King Haggard said, "What she wears, what may have befallen you, what you all are to one another—these things are fortunately no concern of mine. In such matters you may lie to me as much as you dare. I want to know who she is. I want to know how she broke Mabruk's magic without saying a word. I want to know why there are green leaves and fox cubs in her eyes. Speak quickly, and avoid the temptation to lie, especially about the green leaves. Answer me."

Schmendrick did not reply quickly. He made a few small sounds of an earnest nature, but not a sensible word was among them. Molly Grue gathered her courage to answer, even though she suspected that it was impossible to speak the truth to King Haggard. Something in his winter presence blighted all words, tangled meanings, and bent honest intentions into shapes as tormented as the towers of his castle. Still she would have spoken, but another voice was heard in the gloomy chamber: the light, kind, silly voice of the young Prince Lír.

"Father, what difference does it make? She is here now."

King Haggard sighed. It was not a gentle sound, but low and scraping; not a sound of surrender, but the rumbling meditation of a tiger taut to spring. "Of course you are right," he said. "She is here, they are all here, and whether they mean my doom or not, I will look at them for a while. A pleasant air of disaster attends them. Perhaps that is what I want."

To Schmendrick he said curtly, "As my magician, you will entertain me when I wish to be entertained, in manners variously profound and frivolous. You will be expected to know when you are required, and in what guise, for I cannot be forever identifying my moods and desires for your benefit. You will receive no wages, since that is certainly not what you came here for. As for your drab, your assistant, whatever you choose to call her, she will serve me also if she wishes to remain in my castle. From this evening, she is cook and maid-servant together, scrubwoman and scullery maid as well."

He paused, seemingly waiting for Molly to protest, but she only nodded. The moon had moved away from the window, but Prince Lír could see that the dark room was no darker for that. The cool brightness of the Lady Amalthea grew more slowly than had Mabruk's wind, but the prince understood quite well that it was far more dangerous. He wanted to write poems by that light, and he had never wanted to write poems before.

"You may come and go as you please," said King Haggard to the Lady Amalthea. "It may have been foolish of me to admit you, but I am not so foolish as to forbid you this door or that. My secrets guard themselves—will yours do the same? What are you looking at?"

"I am looking at the sea," the Lady Amalthea replied again.

"Yes, the sea is always good," said the king. "We will look at it together one day." He walked slowly to the door. "It will be curious," he said, "to have a creature in the castle whose presence causes Lír to call me 'father' for the first time since he was five years old."

"Six," said Prince Lír. "I was six."

"Five or six," the king said, "it had stopped making me happy long before, and it does not make me happy now. Nothing has yet changed because she is here." He was gone almost as silently as Mabruk, and they heard his tin boots ticking on the stairs.

Molly Grue went softly to the Lady Amalthea and stood by her at the window. "What is it?" she asked. "What do you see?" Schmendrick leaned on the throne, regarding Prince Lír with his long green eyes. Away in the valley of Hagsgate, the cold roar sounded again.

"I will find quarters for you," said Prince Lír. "Are you hungry? I will get you something to eat. I know where there is some cloth, fine satin. You could make a dress."

No one answered him. The heavy night swallowed his words, and it seemed to him that the Lady Amalthea neither heard nor saw him. She did not move, and yet he was certain that she was going away from him as he stood there, like the moon. "Let me help you," Prince Lír said. "What can I do for you? Let me help you."

X

"WHAT CAN I DO for you?" Prince Lír asked. "Nothing very much just now," Molly Grue said. "The water was all I needed. Unless you want to peel the potatoes, which would be all right with me."

"No, I didn't mean that. I mean yes, I will if you want me to, but I was talking to her. I mean, when I talk to her, that's what I keep asking."

"Sit down and peel me a few potatoes," Molly said. "It'll give you something to do with your hands."

They were in the scullery, a dank little room smelling strongly of rotting turnips and fermenting beets. A dozen earthenware dishes were piled in one corner, and a very small fire was shivering under a tripod, trying to boil a large pot of gray water. Molly sat at a rude table which was covered with potatoes, leeks, onions, peppers, carrots, and other vegetables, most of them limp and spotty. Prince Lír stood before her, rocking slowly along his feet and twisting his big, soft fingers together.

"I killed another dragon this morning," he said presently.

"That's nice," Molly answered. "That's fine. How many does that make now?"

"Five. This one was smaller than the others, but it really gave me more trouble. I couldn't get near it on foot, so I had to go in with the lance, and my horse got pretty badly burned. It was funny about the horse—"

Molly interrupted him. "Sit down, Your Highness, and stop doing that. I start to twitch all over just watching you." Prince Lír sat down opposite her. He drew a dagger from his belt and moodily began peeling potatoes. Molly regarded him with a slight, slow smile.

"I brought her the head," he said. "She was in her chamber, as she usually is. I dragged that head all the way up the stairs to lay it at her feet." He sighed, and nicked his finger with the dagger. "Damn. I didn't mind that. All the way up the stairs it was a dragon's head, the proudest gift anyone can give anyone. But when she looked at it, suddenly it became a sad, battered mess of scales and horns, gristly tongue, bloody eyes. I felt like some country butcher who had brought his lass a nice chunk of fresh meat as a token of his love. And then she looked at me, and I was sorry I had killed the thing. Sorry for killing a dragon!" He slashed at a rubbery potato and wounded himself again.

"Cut away from yourself, not toward," Molly advised him. "You know, I really think you could stop slaying dragons for the Lady Amalthea. If five of them haven't moved her, one more isn't likely to do it. Try something else."

"But what's left on earth that I haven't tried?" Prince Lír demanded. "I have swum four rivers, each in full flood and none less than a mile wide. I have climbed seven mountains never before climbed, slept three nights in the Marsh of the Hanged Men, and walked alive out of that forest where the flowers burn your eyes and the nightingales sing poison. I have ended my betrothal to the princess I had agreed to marry—and if you don't think that was a heroic deed, you don't know her mother. I have vanquished exactly fifteen black knights waiting by fifteen fords in their black pavilions, challenging all who come to cross. And I've long since lost count of the witches in the thorny woods, the giants, the demons disguised as damsels; the glass hills, fatal riddles, and terrible tasks; the magic apples, rings, lamps, potions, swords, cloaks, boots, neckties, and nightcaps. Not to mention the winged horses, the basilisks and sea serpents, and all the rest of the livestock." He raised his head, and the dark blue eyes were confused and sad.

"And all for nothing," he said. "I cannot touch her, whatever I do. For her sake, I have become a hero—I, sleepy Lír, my father's sport and shame—but I might just as well have remained the dull fool I was. My great deeds mean nothing to her."

Molly took up her own knife and began to slice the peppers. "Then perhaps the Lady Amalthea is not to be won by great deeds." The prince stared at her, frowning in puzzlement.

"Is there another way to win a maiden?" he asked earnestly. "Molly, do you know another way? Will you tell it to me?" He leaned across the table to seize her hand. "I like being brave well enough, but I will be a lazy coward again if you think that would be better. The sight of her makes me want to do battle with all evil and ugliness, but it also makes me want to sit still and be unhappy. What should I do, Molly?"

"I don't know," she said, suddenly embarrassed. "Kindness, courtesy, good works, that sort of thing. A good sense of humor." A small copper-and-ashes cat with a crooked ear jumped into her lap, purring thunderously and leaning against her hand. Hoping to change the subject, she asked, "What about your horse? What was funny?"

But Prince Lír was staring at the little cat with the crooked ear. "Where did he come from? Is he yours?"

"No," Molly said. "I just feed him, and hold him sometimes." She stroked the cat's thin throat, and it closed its eyes. "I thought he lived here."

The prince shook his head. "My father hates cats. He says that there is no such thing as a cat—it is just a shape that all manner of imps, hobs, and devilkins like to put on, to gain easy entrance into the homes of men. He would kill it if he knew you had it here."

"What about the horse?" Molly asked.

Prince Lír's face grew glum again. "That was strange. When she took no delight in the gift itself, I thought she might be interested to hear how it was won. So I told her about the view and the charge—you know—about the hissing and the naked wings and the way dragons smell, especially on a rainy morning; and the way the black blood jumped at the point of my lance. But she heard none of it, not a word, until I spoke of the rush of fire that nearly burned my poor horse's legs from under him. Then—ah, then she came back from wherever she goes when I talk to her, and she said that she must go and see my horse. So I led her to the stable where the poor brute stood crying with the pain, and she put her hand on him, on his legs. And he stopped moaning. That's a terrible sound they make when they're really hurt. When they stop, it's like a song."

The prince's dagger lay glittering among the potatoes. Outside, great gusts of rain growled round and round the castle walls, but those in the scullery could only hear it, for there was not a single window in the cold room. Nor was there any light, except for the meager glow of the cooking fire. It made the cat dozing in Molly's lap look like a heap of autumn leaves.

"And what happened then?" she asked. "When the Lady Amalthea touched your horse."

"Nothing happened. Nothing at all." Prince Lír suddenly seemed to become angry. He slammed his hand down on the table, and leeks and lentils leaped in all directions. "Did you expect something to happen? She did. Did you expect the beast's burns to heal on the instant—the crackling skin to knit, the black flesh to be whole again? She did—by my hope of her I swear it! And when his legs didn't grow well under her hand, then she ran away. I don't know where she is now."

His voice softened as he spoke, and the hand on the table curled sadly on its side. He rose and went to look into the pot over the fire. "It's boiling," he said, "if you want to put the vegetables in. She wept when my horse's legs did not heal—I heard her weeping—and yet there were no tears in her eyes when she ran away. Everything else was there, but no tears."

Molly put the cat gently on the floor and began gathering the venerable vegetables for the pot. Prince Lír watched her as she moved back and forth, around the table and across the dewy floor. She was singing.

"If I danced with my feet
As I dance in my dreaming,
As graceful and gleaming
As Death in disguise—
Oh, that would be sweet,
But then would I hunger
To be ten years younger,
Or wedded, or wise?"

The prince said, "Who is she, Molly? What kind of woman is it who believes—who *knows*, for I saw her face—that she can cure wounds with a touch, and who weeps without tears?" Molly went on about her work, still humming to herself.

"Any woman can weep without tears," she answered over her shoulder, "and most can heal with their hands. It depends on the wound. She is a woman, Your Highness, and that's riddle enough."

But the prince stood up to bar her way, and she stopped, her apron full of herbs and her hair trailing into her eyes. Prince Lír's face bent toward her: older by five dragons, but handsome and silly still. He said, "You sing. My father sets you to the weariest work there is to do, and still you sing. There has never been singing in this castle, or cats, or the smell of good cooking. It is the Lady Amalthea who causes this, as she causes me to ride out in the morning, seeking danger."

"I was always a fair cook," Molly said mildly. "Living in the greenwood with Cully and his men for seventeen years—"

Prince Lír continued as though she had not spoken. "I want to serve her, as you do, to help her find whatever she has come here to find. I wish to be whatever she has most need of. Tell her so. Will you tell her so?"

Even as he spoke, a soundless step sounded in his eyes, and the sigh of a satin gown troubled his face. The Lady Amalthea stood in the doorway.

A season in King Haggard's chill domain had not dimmed or darkened her. Rather, the winter had sharpened her beauty until it invaded the beholder like a barbed arrow that could not be withdrawn. Her white hair was caught up with a blue ribbon, and her gown was lilac. It did not fit her well. Molly Grue was an indifferent seamstress, and satin made her nervous. But the Lady Amalthea seemed more lovely for the poor work, for the cold stones and the smell of turnips. There was rain in her hair.

Prince Lír bowed to her; a quick, crooked bow, as though someone had hit him in the stomach. "My lady," he mumbled. "You really should cover your head when you go out, this weather."

The Lady Amalthea sat down at the table, and the little autumn-colored cat immediately sprang up before her, purring swiftly and very softly. She put out her hand, but the cat slid away, still purring. He did not appear frightened, but he would not let her touch his rusty fur. The Lady Amalthea beckoned, and the cat wriggled all over, like a dog, but he would not come near.

Prince Lír said hoarsely, "I must go. There is an ogre of some sort devouring village maidens two days' ride from here. It is said that he can be slain only by one who wields the Great Ax of Duke Alban. Unfortunately, Duke Alban himself was one of the first consumed—he was dressed as a village maiden at the time, to deceive the monster—and there is little doubt who holds the Great Ax now. If I do not return, think of me. Farewell."

"Farewell, Your Highness," Molly said. The prince bowed again, and left the scullery on his noble errand. He looked back only once.

"You are cruel to him," Molly said. The Lady Amalthea did not look up. She was offering her open palm to the crook-eared cat, but he stayed where he was, shivering with the desire to go to her.

"Cruel?" she asked. "How can I be cruel? That is for mortals." But then she did raise her eyes, and they were great with sorrow, and with something very near to mockery. She said, "So is kindness."

Molly Grue busied herself with the cooking pot, stirring the soup and seasoning it, bustling numbly. In a low voice, she remarked, "You might give him a gentle word, at the very least. He has undergone mighty trials for you."

"But what word shall I speak?" asked the Lady Amalthea. "I have said nothing to him, yet every day he comes to me with more heads, more horns and hides and tails, more enchanted jewels and bewitched weapons. What will he do if I speak?"

Molly said, "He wishes you to think of him. Knights and princes know only one way to be remembered. It's not his fault. I think he does very well." The Lady Amalthea turned her eyes to the cat again. Her long fingers twisted at a seam of the satin gown.

"No, he does not want my thoughts," she said softly. "He wants me, as much as the Red Bull did, and with no more understanding. But he frightens me even more than the Red Bull, because he has a kind heart. No, I will never speak a promising word to him."

The pale mark on her brow was invisible in the gloom of the scullery. She touched it and then drew her hand away quickly, as though the mark hurt her. "The horse died," she said to the little cat. "I could do nothing."

Molly turned quickly and put her hands on the Lady Amalthea's shoulders. Beneath the sleek cloth, the flesh was cold and hard as any stone of King Haggard's castle. "Oh, my lady," she whispered, "that is because you are out of your true form. When you regain yourself, it will all return—all your power. all your strength, all your sureness. It will come back to you." Had she dared, she would have taken the white girl in her arms and lulled her like a child. She had never dreamed of such a thing before.

But the Lady Amalthea answered, "The magician gave me only the semblance of a human being—the seeming, but not the spirit. If I had died then, I would still have been a unicorn. The old man knew, the wizard. He said nothing, to spite Haggard, but he knew."

Of itself, her hair escaped the blue ribbon and came hurrying down her neck and over her shoulders. The cat was all but won by this eagerness; he lifted a paw to play with it, but then he drew back once more and sat on his haunches, tail curled around his front feet, queer head to the side. His eyes were green, speckled with gold.

"But that was long ago," the girl said. "Now I am two—myself, and this other that you call 'my lady.' For she is here as truly as I am now, though once she was only a veil over me. She walks in the castle, she sleeps, she dresses herself, she takes her meals, and she thinks her own thoughts. If she has no power to heal, or to quiet, still she has another magic. Men speak to her, saying 'Lady Amalthea,' and she answers them, or she does not answer. The king is always watching her out of his pale eyes, wondering what she is, and the king's son wounds himself with loving her and wonders who she is. And every day she searches the sea and the sky, the castle and the courtyard, the keep and the king's face, for something she cannot always remember. What is it, what is it that she is seeking in this strange place? She knew a moment ago, but she has forgotten."

She turned her face to Molly Grue, and her eyes were not the unicorn's eyes. They were lovely still, but in a way that had a name, as a human woman is beautiful. Their depth could be sounded and learned, and their degree of darkness was quite describable. Molly saw fear and loss and bewilderment when she looked into them, and herself; and nothing more.

"Unicorns," she said. "The Red Bull has driven them all away, all but you. You are the last unicorn. You came here to find the others, and to set them free. And so you will."

Slowly the deep, secret sea returned to the Lady Amalthea's eyes, filling them until they were as old and dark and unknowable and indescribable as the sea. Molly watched it happen, and was afraid, but she gripped the bowed shoulders even more tightly, as though her hands could draw despair like a lightning rod. And as she did so, there shivered in the scullery floor a sound she had heard before: a sound like great teeth—molars—grinding together. The Red Bull was turning in his sleep. I wonder if he dreams, Molly thought.

The Lady Amalthea said, "I must go to him. There is no other way, and no time to spare. In this form or my own, I must face him again, even if all my people are dead and there is nothing to be saved. I must go to him, before I forget myself forever, but I do not know the way, and I am lonely." The little cat switched his tail and made an odd sound that was neither a miaow nor a purr.

"I will go with you," Molly said. "I don't know the way down to the Bull either, but there must be one. Schmendrick will come too. He'll make the way for us if we can't find it."

"I hope for no help from the magician," the Lady Amalthea replied disdainfully. "I see him every day playing the fool for King Haggard, amusing him by his failures, by blundering at even the most trifling trick. He says that it is all he can do until his power speaks in him again. But it never will. He is no magician now, but the king's clown."

Molly's face suddenly hurt her, and she turned away to inspect the soup again. Answering past a sharpness in her throat, she said, "He is doing it for you. While you brood and mope and become someone else, he jigs and jests for Haggard, diverting him so that you may have time to find your folk, if they are to be found. But it cannot be long before the king tires of him, as he tires of all things, and casts him down to his dungeons, or some place darker. You do wrong to mock him."

Her voice was a child's thin, sad mumble. She said, "But that will never happen to you. Everyone loves you."

They had a moment to look at each other, the two women: the one fair and foreign in the cold, low room; the other appearing quite at home in such surroundings—an angry little beetle with her own kitchen beauty. Then they heard boots scraping, armor clicking, and the gusty voices of old men. King Haggard's four men-at-arms came trooping into the scullery.

They were all at least seventy years old, gaunt and limping, fragile as crusted snow, but all clad from head to foot in King Haggard's miserly mail and bearing his wry weapons. They entered hailing Molly Grue cheerfully and asking what she had made for their supper, but at the sight of the Lady Amalthea all four became very quiet and bowed deep bows that made them gasp.

"My lady," said the oldest of the men, "command your servants. We are used men, spent men—but if you would see miracles, you have only to request the impossible of us. We will become young again, if you wish it so." His three comrades muttered their agreement.

But the Lady Amalthea whispered in answer, "No, no, you will never be young again." Then she fled from them, with her wild, blinding hair hiding her face, and the satin gown hissing.

"How wise she is!" the oldest man-at-arms declared. "She understands that not even her beauty can do battle with time. It is a rare, sad wisdom for one so young. That soup smells delicious, Molly."

"It smells too savory for this place," a second man grumbled as they all sat down around the table. "Haggard hates good food. He says that no meal is good enough to justify all the money and effort wasted in preparing it. 'It is an illusion,' says he, 'and an expense. Live as I do, undeceived.' *Brraaahh!*" He shuddered and grimaced, and the others laughed.

"To live like Haggard," said another man-at-arms as Molly spooned the steaming soup into his bowl. "That will be my fate in the next world, if I don't behave myself in this one."

"Why do you stay in his service, then?" Molly demanded. She sat down with them and rested her chin on her hands. "He pays you no wages," she said, "and he feeds you as little as he dares. He sends you out in the worst weather to steal for him in Hagsgate, for he never spends a penny of the wealth in his strong room. He forbids everything, from lights to lutes, from fires to fairs and singing to sinning; from books and beer and talk of spring to games you play with bits of string. Why not leave him? What in the world is there to keep you here?"

The four old men looked nervously at one another, coughing and sighing. The first said, "It is our age. Where else could we go? We are too old to be wandering the roads, looking for work and shelter."

"It is our age," said the second man-at-arms. "When you are old, anything that does not disturb you is a comfort. Cold and darkness and boredom long ago lost their sharp edges for us, but warmth, singing, spring—no, they would all be disturbances. There are worse things than living like Haggard."

The third man said, "Haggard is older than we are. In time Prince Lír will be king in this country, and I will not leave the world until I have seen that day. I have always been fond of the boy, since he was small."

Molly found that she was not hungry. She looked around at the faces of the old men, and listened to the sounds their seamy lips and shrunken throats made as they drank her soup; and she was suddenly glad that King Haggard always had his meals alone. Molly inevitably came to care for anyone she fed.

Cautiously she asked them, "Have you ever heard a tale that Prince Lír is not Haggard's adopted nephew at all?" The men-at-arms showed no surprise at the question.

"Ay," the eldest replied, "We know that story. It may well be true, for the prince certainly bears no family resemblance to the king. But what of it? Better a stolen stranger ruled the land than a true son of King Haggard."

"But if the prince was stolen from Hagsgate," Molly cried, "then he is the man who will make the curse on this castle come true!" And she repeated the rhyme that the man Drinn had recited in the inn at Hagsgate.

"Yet none but one of Hagsgate town
May bring the castle swirling down."

But the old men shook their heads, grinning with teeth as rusty as their casques and corselets. "Not Prince Lír," the third man said. "The prince may slay a thousand dragons, but he will level no castles, overthrow no kings. It is not in his nature. He is a dutiful son who seeks—alas—only to be worthy of the man he calls his father. Not Prince Lír. The rhyme must speak of some other."

"And even if Prince Lír were the one," the second man added, "even if the curse had marked him for its messenger, still he would fail. For between King Haggard and any doom stands the Red Bull."

A silence sprang into the room and stood there, darkening all faces with its savage shadow and chilling the good hot soup with its breath. The little autumn cat stopped purring on Molly's lap, and the thin cooking fire cowered down. The cold scullery walls seemed to draw closer together.

The fourth man-at-arms, who had not spoken before, called across the dark to Molly Grue, "There is the true reason that we stay in Haggard's employ. He does not wish us to leave, and what King Haggard wishes or does not wish is the only concern of the Red Bull. We are Haggard's minions, but we are the Red Bull's prisoners."

Molly's hand was steady as she stroked the cat, but her voice was pinched and dry when she spoke. "What is the Red Bull to King Haggard?"

It was the oldest man-at-arms who answered. "We do not know. The Bull has always been here. It serves Haggard as his army and his bulwark; it is his strength and the source of his strength; and it must be his one companion as well, for I am sure he descends to its lair betimes, down some secret stair. But whether it obeys Haggard from choice or compulsion, and whether the Bull or the king is the master—that we have never known."

The fourth man, who was the youngest, leaned toward Molly Grue, his pink, wet eyes suddenly eager. He said, "The Red Bull is a demon, and its reckoning for attending Haggard will one day be Haggard himself." Another man interrupted him, insisting that the clearest evidence showed that the Bull was King Haggard's enchanted slave, and would be until it broke the bewitchment that held it and destroyed its former lord. They began to shout and spill their soup.

But Molly asked, not loudly, but in a way that made them all be still. "Do you know what a unicorn is? Have you ever seen one?"

Of everything alive in the little room, only the cat and the silence seemed to look back at her with any understanding. The four men blinked and belched and rubbed their eyes. Deep, restless, the sleeping Bull stirred again.

The meal being over, the men-at-arms saluted Molly Grue and left the scullery, two for their beds, two to take up their night's vigil in the rain. The oldest of the men waited until the others were gone before he said quietly to Molly, "Be careful of the Lady Amalthea. When she first came here, her beauty was such that even this accursed castle became beautiful too—like the moon, which is only a shining stone. But she has been here too long. Now she is as beautiful as ever, but the rooms and roofs that contain her are somehow meaner for her presence."

He gave a long sigh, which frayed into a whine. "I am familiar with that kind of beauty," he said, "but I had never seen that other sort before. Be careful of her. She should go away from here."

Alone, Molly put her face in the little cat's random fur. The cooking fire fluttered low, but she did not get up to feed it. Small swift creatures scuttled across the room, making a sound like King Haggard's voice; and the rain rumbled against the castle walls, sounding like the Red Bull. Then, as though in answer, she heard the Bull. His bellow shattered the stones under her feet, and she clutched desperately at the table to keep herself and the cat from plunging down to him. She cried out.

The cat said, "He is going out. He goes out every sundown to hunt for the strange white beast that escaped him. You know that perfectly well. Don't be stupid."

The hungering roar came again, further away. Molly caught her breath and stared at the little cat. She was not as amazed as another might have been; these days she was harder to surprise than most women. "Could you always talk?" she asked the cat. "Or was it the sight of the Lady Amalthea that gave you speech?"

The cat licked a front paw reflectively. "It was the sight of her that made me feel like talking," he said at length, "and let us leave it at that. So that is a unicorn. She is very beautiful."

"How do you know she is a unicorn?" Molly demanded. "And why were you afraid to let her touch you? I saw you. You were afraid of her."

"I doubt that I will feel like talking for very long," the cat replied without rancor. "I would not waste time in foolishness if I were you. As to your first question, no cat out of its first fur can ever be deceived by appearances. Unlike human beings, who enjoy them. As for your second question—" Here he faltered, and suddenly became very interested in washing; nor would he speak until he had licked himself fluffy and then licked himself smooth again. Even then he would not look at Molly, but examined his claws.

"If she had touched me," he said very softly, "I would have been hers and not my own, not ever again. I wanted her to touch me, but I could not let her. No cat will. We let human beings caress us because it is pleasant enough and calms them—but not her. The price is more than a cat can pay."

Molly picked him up then, and he purred into her neck for such a long while that she began to fear that his moment of speech had passed. But presently he said, "You have very little time. Soon she will no longer remember who she is, or why she came to this place, and the Red Bull will no longer roar in the night for her. It may be that she will marry the good prince, who loves her." The cat pushed his head hard into Molly's suddenly still hand. "Do that," he commanded. "The prince is very brave, to love a unicorn. A cat can appreciate valiant absurdity."

"No," Molly Grue said. "No, that cannot be. She is the last."

"Well then, she must do what she came to do," the cat replied. "She must take the king's way down to the Bull."

Molly held him so fiercely that he gave a mouselike squeak of protest. "Do you know the way?" she asked, as eagerly as Prince Lír had demanded of her. "Tell me the way, tell me where we must go." She put the cat down on the table and took her hands off him.

The cat made no answer for a long time, but his eyes grew brighter and brighter: gold shivering down to cover the green. His crooked ear twitched, and the black tip of his tail, and nothing more.

"When the wine drinks itself," he said, "when the skull speaks, when the clock strikes the right time—only then will you find the tunnel that leads to the Red Bull's lair." He tucked his paws under his chest and added, "There's a trick to it, of course."

"I'll bet," Molly said grimly. "There is a horrible, crumbly old skull stuck up high on a pillar in the great hall, but it hasn't had anything to say for some time. The clock that stands nearby is mad, and strikes when it pleases—midnight every hour, seventeen o'clock at four, or perhaps not a sound for a week. And the wine—oh, cat, wouldn't it be simpler just to show me the tunnel? You know where it is, don't you?"

"Of course I know," answered the cat, with a glinting, curling yawn. "Of course it would be simpler for me to show you. Save a lot of time and trouble."

His voice was becoming a sleepy drawl, and Molly realized that, like King Haggard himself, he was losing interest. Quickly she asked him, "Tell me one thing, then. What became of the unicorns? Where are they?"

The cat yawned again. "Near and far, far and near," he murmured. "They are within sight of your lady's eyes, but almost out of reach of her memory. They are coming closer, and they are going away." He closed his eyes.

Molly's breath came like rope, fretting against her harsh throat. "Damn you, why won't you help me?" she cried. "Why must you always speak in riddles?"

One eye opened slowly, green and gold as sunlight in the woods. The cat said, "I am what I am. I would tell you what you want to know if I could, for you have been kind to me. But I am a cat, and no cat anywhere ever gave anyone a straight answer."

His last few words drowsed away into a deep, regular purr, and he was asleep with the one eye partly open. Molly held him on her lap and stroked him, and he purred in his sleep, but he did not speak again.

XI

PRINCE LÍR CAME HOME three days after he set out to slay the maiden-fancying ogre, with the Great Axe of Duke Alban slung behind him and the ogre's head bumping at his saddlebow. He offered neither prize to the Lady Amalthea, nor did he rush to find her with the monster's blood still brown on his hands. He had made up his mind, as he explained to Molly Grue in the scullery that evening, nevermore to trouble the Lady Amalthea with his attentions, but to live quietly in the thought of her, serving her ardently until his lonely death, but seeking neither her company, her admiration, nor her love. "I will be as anonymous as the air she breathes," he said, "as invisible as the force that holds her on the earth." Thinking about it for a little, he added, "I may write a poem for her now and then, and slip it under her door, or just leave it somewhere for her to chance upon. But I won't ever sign the poem."

"It's very noble," Molly said. She felt relieved that the prince was giving up his courtship, and amused as well, and somewhat sad. "Girls like poems better than dead dragons and magic swords," she offered. "I always did, anyway, when I was a girl. The reason I ran off with Cully—"

But Prince Lír interrupted her, saying firmly, "No, do not give me hope. I must learn to live without hope, as my father does, and perhaps we will understand each other at last." He dug into his pockets, and Molly heard paper crackling. "Actually, I've already written a few poems about it—hope and her, and so on. You might look them over if you wanted to."

"I'd be very pleased," Molly said. "But will you never go out again, then, to fight with black knights and ride through rings of fire?" The words were meant teasingly, but she found as she spoke that she would have been a little sorry if it were so, for his adventures had made him much handsomer and taken off a lot of weight, and given him, besides, a hint of the musky fragrance of death that clings to all heroes. But the prince shook his head, looking almost embarrassed.

"Oh, I suppose I'll keep my hand in," he muttered. "But it wouldn't be for the show of it, or for her to find out. It was like that at first, but you get into the habit of rescuing people, breaking enchantments, challenging the wicked duke in fair combat—it's hard to give up being a hero, once you get used to it. Do you like the first poem?"

"It certainly has a lot of feeling," she said. "Can you really rhyme 'bloomed' and 'ruined'?"

"It needs a bit of smoothing out," Prince Lír admitted. " 'Miracle' 's the word I'm worried about."

"I was wondering about 'grackle' myself."

"No, the spelling. Is it one *r* and two *l*s, or the other way round?"

"One *r*, anyway, I think," Molly said. "Schmendrick"—for the magician had just stooped through the doorway—"how many *r*s in 'miracle'?"

"Two," he answered wearily. "It has the same root as 'mirror.' " Molly ladled him out a bowl of broth, and he sat down at the table. His eyes were hard and cloudy as jade, and one of the lids was twitching.

"I can't do this very much longer," he said slowly. "It isn't this horrible place, and it isn't having to be listening for him all the time—I'm getting rather good at that—it's the wretched cheapjack flummery he has me perform for him, hours on end—all night last night. I wouldn't mind if he asked for the real magic, or even for simple conjuring, but it's always the rings and the goldfish, the cards and the scarves and the string, exactly as it was in the Midnight Carnival. I can't do it. Not much more."

"But that was what he wanted you for," Molly protested. "If he wanted real magic, he'd have kept the old magician, that Mabruk." Schmendrick raised his head and gave her a look that was almost amused. "I didn't mean it like that," she said. "Besides it's only a little while, until we find the way to the Red Bull that the cat told me about."

She lowered her voice to a whisper as she spoke this last,

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and both of them glanced quickly over at Prince Lír; but he was sitting on a stool in the corner, evidently writing another poem. "Gazelle," he murmured, tapping his pen against his lips. "Demoiselle, citadel, asphodel, philomel, parallel . . ." He chose 'farewell,' and scribbled rapidly.

"We will never find the way," Schmendrick said very quietly. "Even if the cat told the truth, which I doubt, Haggard will make sure we never have time to investigate the skull and the clock. Why do you suppose he piles more work on you every day, if not to keep you from prowling and prying in the great hall? Why do you think he keeps me entertaining him with my carnival tricks?—why do you think he took me as his wizard in the first place? Molly, he *knows*, I'm sure of it! He knows what she is, though he doesn't quite believe it yet—but when he does, he'll know what to do. He knows. I see it in his face sometimes."

"The lift of longing, and the crash of loss," Prince Lír said. "The bitterness of tumpty-umpty-oss. Cross, boss, moss. Damn."

Schmendrick leaned across the table. "We can't stay here and wait for him to strike. The only hope we have is to escape at night—by sea, perhaps, if I can lay hold of a boat somewhere. The men-at-arms will look the other way, and the gate—"

"But the others!" she cried softly. "How can we leave, when she has come so far to find the other unicorns, and we know they are here?" Yet one small, tender, treacherous part of her was suddenly eager to be convinced of the quest's failure, and she knew it, and was angry at Schmendrick. "Well, but what about your magic?" she asked, "what about your own little search? Are you going to give that up too? Will she die in human shape, and you live forever? You might as well let the Bull have her then."

The magician sank back, his face gone as pale and crumpled as a washerwoman's fingers. "It doesn't really matter, one way or the other," he said, almost to himself. "She's no unicorn now, but a mortal woman—someone for that lout to sigh over and write poems about. Maybe Haggard won't find her out after all. She'll be his daughter, and he'll never know. That's funny." He put his soup aside untasted and leaned his head into his hands. "I couldn't change her back into a unicorn if we did find the others," he said. "There's no magic in me."

"Schmendrick—" she began; but at that moment he jumped to his feet and rushed out of the scullery, though she had not heard the king summon him. Prince Lír never looked up, but went on drumming meters and sampling rhymes. Molly hung a kettle over the fire for the sentries' tea.

"I've got it all but the final couplet," Lír said presently. "Do you want to hear it now, or would you rather wait?"

"Whichever you like," she said, so he read it then, but she never heard a word of it. Fortunately, the men-at-arms came in before he had finished reading, and he was too shy to ask her opinion in their presence. By the time they left he was working on something else, and it was very late when he bade her good night. Molly was sitting at the table, holding her motley cat.

The new poem was meant to be a sestina, and Prince Lír's head was jangling happily as he juggled the end words on his way up the stairs to his chamber. "I will leave the first one at her door," he thought, "and save the others until tomorrow." He was debating his original decision against signing his work, and playing with such pen names as "The Knight of the Shadows," and "*Le Chevalier Mal-Aimé*," when he turned a corner and met the Lady Amalthea. She was coming down quickly in the dark, and when she saw him she made a strange, bleating sound and stood still, three steps above him.

She wore a robe that one of the king's men had stolen for her in Hagsgate. Her hair was down and her feet were bare, and the sight of her on the stair sent such sorrow licking along Prince Lír's bones that he dropped his poems and his pretenses together and actually turned to run. But he was a hero in all ways, and he turned bravely back to face her, saying in a calm and courtly manner, "Give you good evening, my lady."

The Lady Amalthea stared at him through the gloom, putting out a hand, but drawing it back before she touched him. "Who are you?" she whispered. "Are you Rukh?"

"I'm Lír," he answered, suddenly frightened. "Don't you know me?" But she backed away, and it seemed to the prince that her steps were as flowing as an animal's, and that she even lowered her head in the way of a goat or a deer. He said, "I'm Lír."

"The old woman," said the Lady Amalthea. "The moon went out. Ah!" She shivered once, and then her eyes recognized him. But all her body was still wild and watchful and she came no nearer to him.

"You were dreaming, my lady," he said, finding knightly speech again. "I would that I might know your dream."

"I have dreamed it before," she answered slowly. "I was in a cage, and there were others—beasts in cages, and an old woman. But I will not trouble you, my lord prince. I have dreamed it many times before."

She would have left him then, but he spoke to her in a voice that only heroes have, as many animals develop a certain call when they become mothers. "A dream that returns so often is like to be a messenger, come to warn you of the future or to remind you of things untimely forgotten. Say more of this, if you will, and I will try to riddle it for you."

Thereupon she halted, looking at him with her head a little turned, still with the air of some slim, furred creature peering out of a thicket. But her eyes held a human look of loss, as though she had missed something she needed, or suddenly realized that she had never had it. If he had even blinked, she would have been gone; but he did not blink, and he held her, as he had learned to hold griffins and chimeras motionless with his steady gaze. Her bare feet wounded him deeper than any tusk or riving talon ever had, but he was a true hero.

The Lady Amalthea said, "In the dream there are black, barred wagons, and beasts that are and are not, and a winged being that clangs like metal in the moonlight. The tall man has green eyes and bloody hands."

"The tall man must be your uncle, the magician," Prince Lír mused. "That part's clear enough, anyway, and the bloody hands don't surprise me. I never cared much for his looks, if you'll pardon my saying so. Is that all the dream?"

"I cannot tell you all of it," she said. "It is never finished." Fear came back to her eyes like a great stone falling into a pool: all was clouded and swirling, and quick shadows were rushing everywhere. She said, "I am running away from a good place where I was safe, and the night is burning around me. But it is day too, and I am walking under beech trees in the warm, sour rain, and there are butterflies, and a honey sound, and dappled roads, and towns like fishbones, and the flying thing is killing the old woman. I am running and running into the freezing fire, however I turn, and my legs are the legs of a beast—"

"Lady," Prince Lír broke in, "my lady, by your leave, no more." Her dream was darkening into shape between them, and suddenly he did not want to know what it meant. "No more," he said.

"But I must go on," said the Lady Amalthea, "for it is never finished. Even when I wake, I cannot tell what is real, and what I am dreaming as I move and speak and eat my dinner. I remember what cannot have happened, and forget something that is happening to me now. People look at me as though I should know them, and I do know them in the dream, and always the fire draws nearer, though I am awake—"

"No more," he said desperately. "A witch built this castle, and to speak of nightmares here often makes them come true." It was not her dream that chilled him, but that she did not weep as she told it. As a hero, he understood weeping women and knew how to make them stop crying—generally you killed something—but her calm terror confused and unmanned him, while the shape of her face crumbled the distant dignity he had been so pleased at maintaining. When he spoke again, his voice was young and stumbling.

"I would court you with more grace," he said, "if I knew how. My dragons and my feats of arms weary you, but they are all I have to offer. I haven't been a hero for very long, and before I was a hero I was nothing at all, nothing but my father's dull, soft son. Perhaps I am only dull in a new way now, but I am here, and it is wrong of you to let me go to waste. I wish you wanted something of me. It wouldn't have to be a valiant deed—just useful."

Then the Lady Amalthea smiled at him for the first time since she had come to stay in King Haggard's castle. It was a small smile, like the new moon, a slender bend of brightness on the edge of the unseen, but Prince Lír leaned toward it to be warm. He would have cupped his hands around her smile and breathed it brighter, if he had dared.

"Sing to me," she said. "That would be valiant, to raise your voice in this dark, lonely place, and it will be useful as well. Sing to me, sing loudly—drown out my dreams, keep me from remembering whatever wants me to remember it. Sing to me, my lord prince, if it please you. It may not seem a hero's task, but I would be glad of it."

So Prince Lír sang out lustily, there on the cold stairway, and many damp, unseen creatures went flopping and scurrying for cover before the daylight gaiety of his voice. He sang the first words that came to him, and they were these:

"When I was a young man, and very well thought of,
I couldn't ask aught that the ladies denied.
I nibbled their hearts like a handful of raisins,
And I never spoke love but I knew that I lied.

"But I said to myself, 'Ah, they none of them know
The secret I shelter and savor and save.
I wait for the one who will see through my seeming,
And I'll know when I love by the way I behave.'

"The years drifted over like clouds in the heavens;
The ladies went by me like snow on the wind.
I charmed and I cheated, deceived and dissembled,
And I sinned, and I sinned, and I sinned, and I sinned.

"But I said to myself, 'Ah, they none of them see
There's part of me pure as the whisk of a wave.
My lady is late, but she'll find I've been faithful,
And I'll know when I love by the way I behave.'

"At last came a lady both knowing and tender,
Saying, 'You're not at all what they take you to be.'
I betrayed her before she had quite finished speaking,
And she swallowed cold poison and jumped in the sea.

"And I say to myself, when there's time for a word,
As I gracefully grow more debauched and depraved,
'Ah, love may be strong, but a habit is stronger,
And I knew when I loved by the way I behaved.' "

The Lady Amalthea laughed when he was done, and that sound seemed to set the old, old darkness of the castle hissing back from them both. "That was useful," she said. "Thank you, my lord."

"I don't know why I sang that one," Prince Lír said awkwardly. "One of my father's men used to sing it to me. I don't really believe it. I think that love is stronger than habits or circumstances. I think it is possible to keep yourself for someone for a long time, and still remember why you were waiting when she comes at last." The Lady Amalthea smiled again, but she did not answer, and the prince took a single step closer to her.

Marveling at his own boldness, he said softly, "I would enter your sleep if I could, and guard you there, and slay the thing that hounds you, as I would if it had the courage to face me in fair daylight. But I cannot come in unless you dream of me."

Before she could speak, if she meant to, they heard footsteps below them on the winding stair, and King Haggard's veiled voice saying, "I heard him singing. What business had he to be singing?"

Then Schmendrick, the royal wizard, his own voice meek and hurried, "Sire, it was but some heroic lay, some *chanson de geste*, such as he often sings when he rides out to glory, or rides home to renown. Be assured, Your Majesty—"

"He never sings here," the king said. "He sings continuously on his fool's wanderings, I am sure, because that is what heroes do. But he was singing here, and not of battle and gallantry either, but of love. Where is she? I knew he was singing of love before I ever heard him, for the very stones shuddered as they do when the Bull moves in the earth. Where is she?"

The prince and the Lady Amalthea looked at each other in the darkness, and in that moment they were side by side, though neither moved. With this came fear of the king, for whatever had been born between them, it might be something he wanted. A landing above them gave onto a corridor; they turned and ran together, though they could not see beyond their breaths. Her feet were as silent as the promise she had given him, but his own heavy boots rang exactly like boots on the stone floor. King Haggard made no pursuit, but his voice rustled down the hallway after them, whispering under the magician's words, "Mice, my lord, beyond a doubt. Fortunately, I am possessed of a singular spell—"

"Let them run," the king said. "It suits me well that they should run."

When they stopped running, wherever they stopped, they looked at each other again.

So the winter whined and crept along, not toward any spring, but toward the brief, devouring summer of King Haggard's country. Life in the castle went on in the silence that fills a place where no one hopes for anything. Molly Grue cooked and laundered, scrubbed stone, mended armor and sharpened swords; she chopped wood, milled flour, groomed horses and cleaned their stalls, melted down stolen gold and silver for the king's coffers, and made bricks without straw. And in the evenings, before she went to bed, she usually read over Prince Lír's new poems to the Lady Amalthea, and praised them, and corrected the spelling.

Schmendrick fooled and juggled and flimflammed as the king bade him, hating it, and knowing that Haggard knew he hated it and took his pleasure thereby. He never again suggested to

Molly that they escape from the castle before Haggard made sure of the truth of the Lady Amalthea; but he no longer sought to discover the secret way down to the Red Bull, even when he was allowed time to himself. He seemed to have surrendered, not to the king but to some far older, crueler enemy that had caught up with him at last, this winter in this place.

The Lady Amalthea grew as much more beautiful every day as that day was grimmer and gloomier than the one before. The old men-at-arms, coming down drenched and shivering from walking their posts in the rain, or in from stealing things for the king, opened as quietly as flowers when they met her on the stairs or in the hallways. She would smile at them, and speak gently; but when she had passed by, the castle always seemed darker than ever, and the wind outside would rattle the thick sky like a sheet on a clothesline. For her beauty was human and doomed, and there was no comfort in it for old men. They could only draw their dripping cloaks tighter and limp on down to the small fire in the scullery.

But the Lady Amalthea and Prince Lír walked and spoke and sang together as blithely as though King Haggard's castle had become a green wood, wild and shadowy with spring. They climbed the crooked towers like hills, picnicked in stone meadows under a stone sky, and splashed up and down stairways that had softened and quickened into streams. He told her everything he knew, and what he thought about all of it, and happily invented a life and opinions for her, which she helped him do by listening. Nor was she deceiving him, for she truly remembered nothing before the castle and him. She began and ended with Prince Lír—except for the dreams, and they soon faded, as he had said they would.

They seldom heard the hunting roar of the Red Bull at night any more, but when the hungering sound came to her ears, then she would be frightened, and the walls and the winter would grow up around them again, as though their spring were all of her making, her joy's gift to the prince. He would have held her at such times, but he had long known her dread of being touched.

One afternoon the Lady Amalthea stood on the highest tower of the castle, watching for Prince Lír's return from an expedition against a brother-in-law of the ogre he had slain; for he still went out on occasional errantries, as he had told Molly he might. The sky was piled up over the valley of Hagsgate, the color of dirty soap, but it was not raining. Far below, the sea slid out toward the smoky horizon in hard bands of silver and green and kelpy brown. The ugly birds were restless: they flew out often, two and three together, circled swiftly over the water, and then returned to strut on the sand, chortling and cocking their heads at King Haggard's castle on the cliff. "Saidso, saidso!" The tide was low, and near to turning.

The Lady Amalthea began to sing, and her voice balanced and hovered in the slow, cold air like another sort of bird.

"I am a king's daughter,
And I grow old within
The prison of my person,
The shackles of my skin.
And I would run away
And beg from door to door—"

She did not remember having heard the song before, but the words pinched and plucked at her like children, trying to drag her back to some place that they wanted to see again. She moved her shoulders to get away from them.

"But I am not old," she said to herself, "and I am no prisoner. I am the Lady Amalthea, beloved of Lír, who has come into my dreams so that I may not doubt myself even while I sleep. Where could I have learned a song of sorrow? I am the Lady Amalthea, and I know only the songs that Prince Lír has taught me."

She lifted a hand to touch the mark on her forehead. The sea wheeled by, calm as the zodiac, and the ugly birds screamed. It troubled her a little that the mark would not go away.

"Your majesty," she said, though there had been no sound. She heard the rustling chuckle at her back, and turned to see the king. He wore a gray cloak over his mail, but his head was bare. The black lines on his face showed where the fingernails of age had skidded down the hard skin, but he looked stronger than his son, and wilder.

"You are quick for what you are," he said, "but slow, I think, for what you were. It is said that love makes men swift and women slow. I will catch you at last if you love much more."

She smiled at him without replying. She never knew what to say to the pale-eyed old man whom she so rarely saw, except as a movement on the edge of the solitude that she shared with Prince Lír. Then armor winked deep in the valley, and she heard the scrape of a weary horse stumbling on stone.

"Your son is coming home," she said. "Let us watch him together."

King Haggard came slowly to stand beside her at the parapet, but he gave no more than a glance to the tiny, glinting figure riding home. "Nay, what concern have you or I with Lír, truly?" he asked. "He's none of mine, either by birth or belonging. I picked him up where someone else had set him down, thinking that I had never been happy and never had a son. It was pleasant enough at first, but it died quickly. All things die when I pick them up. I do not know why they die, but it has always been so, save for the one dear possession that has not turned cold and dull as I guarded it—the only thing that has ever belonged to me." His grim face gave the sudden starved leap of a sprung trap. "And Lír will be no help to you in finding it," he said. "He has never even known what it is."

Without warning, the whole castle sang like a plucked string as the beast asleep at its root shifted his dire weight. The Lady Amalthea caught her balance easily, being well used to this, and said lightly, "The Red Bull. But why do you think I have come to steal the Bull? I have no kingdom to keep, and no wish for conquest. What would I do with him? How much does he eat?"

"Do not mock me!" the king answered. "The Red Bull is no more mine than the boy is, and he does not eat, and he cannot be stolen. He serves anyone who has no fear—and I have no more fear than I have rest." Yet the Lady Amalthea saw forebodings sliding over the long, gray face, scuttling in the shadows of brows and bones. "Do not mock me," he said. "Why will you play that you have forgotten your quest, and that I am to remind you of it? I know what you have come for, and you know very well that I have it. Take it, then, take it if you can—but do not dare to surrender now!" The black wrinkles were all on edge, like knives.

Prince Lír was singing as he rode, though the Lady Amalthea could not yet hear the words. She said quietly to the king, "My lord, in all your castle, in all your realm, in all the kingdoms that the Red Bull may bring you, there is only one thing I desire—and you have just told me that he is not yours to give or to keep. Whatever it is you treasure that is not he, I truly wish you joy of it. Good day, Your Majesty."

She moved toward the tower stairway, but he stood in her way and she paused, looking at him with her eyes as dark as hoofprints in snow. The gray king smiled, and a strange kindness for him chilled her for an instant, for she suddenly fancied that they were somehow alike. But then he said, "I know you. I almost knew you as soon as I saw you on the road, coming to my door with your cook and your clown. Since then, there is no movement of yours that has not betrayed you. A pace, a glance, a turn of the head, the flash of your throat as you breathe, even your way of standing perfectly still—they were all my spies. You have made me wonder for a little while, and in my own way I am grateful. But your time is done."

He looked seaward over his shoulder, and suddenly stepped to the parapet with the thoughtless grace of a young man. "The tide is turning," he said. "Come and see it. Come here." He spoke very softly, but his voice suddenly held the crying of the ugly birds on the shore. "Come here," he said fiercely. "Come here, I won't touch you."

Prince Lír sang:

"I will love you as long as I can,
However long that may be . . ."

The horrible head on his saddle was harmonizing in a kind of bass falsetto. The Lady Amalthea went to stand with the king.

The waves were coming in under the thick, swirling sky, growing as slowly as trees as they bulged across the sea. They crouched as they neared the shore, arching their backs higher and higher, and then sprang up the beach as furiously as trapped animals bounding at a wall and falling back with a sobbing snarl to leap again and again, claws caked and breaking, while the ugly birds yelled mournfully. The waves were gray and green as pigeons until they broke, and then they were the color of the hair that blew across her eyes.

"There," a strange, high voice said close to her. "There they are." King Haggard was grinning at her and pointing down to the white water. "There they are," he said, laughing like a frightened child, "there they are. Say that they are not your people, say that you did not come here searching for them. Say now that you have stayed all winter in my castle for love."

He could not wait for her answer, but turned away to look at the waves. His face was changed beyond believing: delight coloring the somber skin, rounding over the cheekbones, and loosening the bowstring mouth. "They are mine," he said softly, "they belong to me. The Red Bull gathered them for me, one at a time, and I bade him drive each one into the sea. What better place could there be to keep unicorns, and what other cage could hold them? For the Bull keeps guard over them, awake or asleep, and he daunted their hearts long ago. Now they live in the sea, and every tide still carries them within an easy step of the land, but they dare not take that step, they dare not come out of the water. They are afraid of the Red Bull."

Nearby, Prince Lír sang, "Others may offer more than they can give, All that they have for as long as they live . . ." The Lady Amalthea closed her hands on the parapet and wished for him to come to her, for she knew now that King Haggard was mad. Below them lay the thin, sallow beach, and the rocks, and the rising tide, and nothing more.

"I like to watch them. They fill me with joy." The childish voice was all but singing. "I am sure it is joy. The first time I felt it, I thought I was going to die. There were two of them in the early morning shadows. One was drinking from a stream, and the other was resting her head on his back. I thought I was going to die. I said to the Red Bull, 'I must have that. I must have all of it, all there is, for my need is very great.' So the Bull caught them, one by one. It was all the same to the Bull. It would have been the same if I had demanded tumblebugs or crocodiles. He can only tell the difference between what I want and what I do not want."

He had forgotten her for the moment as he leaned over the low wall, and she might have fled the tower then. But she stayed where she was, for an old bad dream was waking all around her, though it was daylight. The tide shattered on the rocks and tumbled together again, and Prince Lír rode along singing, "But I will love you as long as I can, And never ask if you love me."

"I suppose I was young when I first saw them," King Haggard said. "Now I must be old—at least I have picked many more things up than I had then, and put them all down again. But I always knew that nothing was worth the investment of my heart, because nothing lasts, and I was right, and so I was always old. Yet each time I see my unicorns, it is like that morning in the woods, and I am truly young in spite of myself, and anything can happen in a world that holds such beauty."

In the dream I looked down at four white legs, and felt the earth under split hoofs. There was a burning on my brow, as there is now. But there were no unicorns coming in on the tide. The king is mad. He said, "I wonder what will become of them when I am gone. The Red Bull will forget them immediately, I know, and be off to find a new master, but I wonder if they will take their freedom even then. I hope not, for then they will belong to me forever."

Then he turned to look at her again, and his eyes were as gentle and greedy as Prince Lír's eyes became when he looked at her. "You are the last," he said. "The Bull missed you because you were shaped like a woman, but I always knew. How did you manage the change, by the way? Your magician couldn't have done it. I don't think he could turn cream into butter."

If she had let go of the parapet she would have fallen, but she answered him quite calmly, "My lord, I do not understand. I see nothing at all in the water."

The king's face shivered as though she were looking at him through fire. "Do you still deny yourself?" he whispered. "Do you dare deny yourself? Nay, that's as false and cowardly as though you were truly human. I'll hurl you down to your folk with my own hands if you deny yourself." He took a step toward her, and she watched him with her eyes open, unable to move.

The tumult of the sea filled her head, together with Prince Lír's singing, and the blubbering death wail of the man named Rukh. King Haggard's gray face hung over her like a hammer, muttering, "It must be so, I cannot be mistaken. Yet her eyes are as stupid as his—as any eyes that never saw unicorns, never saw anything but themselves in a glass. What cheat is this, how can it be? There are no green leaves in her eyes now."

Then she did close her eyes, but she shut in more than she kept out. The bronze-winged creature with a hag's face swung by, laughing and prattling, and the butterfly folded its wings to strike. The Red Bull moved silently through the forest, pushing the bare branches aside with his pale horns. She knew when King Haggard went away, but she did not open her eyes.

It was long after, or only a little while later, that she heard the magician's voice behind her. "Be still, be still, it's over." She had not known that she was making any sound.

"In the sea," he said. "In the sea. Well, don't feel too bad about it. I didn't see them either, not this time or any other that I've stood here and watched the tide coming in. But he saw them—and if Haggard sees something, it's there." He laughed with a sound like an ax falling on wood. "Don't feel bad. This is a witch-castle, and it's hard to look closely at things, living here. It's not enough to be ready to see—you have to be looking all the time." He laughed again, more gently. "All right," he said. "We'll find them now. Come on. Come with me."

She turned to him, moving her mouth to make words, but no words came out. The magician was studying her face with his green eyes. "Your face is wet," he said worriedly. "I hope that's spray. If you've become human enough to cry, then no magic in the world—oh, it must be spray. Come with me. It had better be spray."

XII

IN THE GREAT HALL of King Haggard's castle, the clock struck six. Actually, it was eleven minutes past midnight, but the hall was little darker than it had been at six o'clock, or at noon. Yet those who lived in the castle told time by the difference in the dark. There were hours when the hall was cold simply for want of warmth and gloomy for lack of light; when the air was stale and still, and the stones stank of old water because there were no windows to let in the scouring wind. That was daytime.

But at night, as some trees hold a living light all day, hold it with the undersides of their leaves until long after sundown—so at night the castle was charged and swarming with darkness, alive with darkness. Then the great hall was cold for a reason; then the small sounds that slept by day woke up to patter and scratch in the corners. It was night when the old smell of the stones seemed to rise from far below the floor.

"Light a light," Molly Grue said. "Please, can you make a light?"

Schmendrick muttered something curt and professional. For a moment nothing happened, but then a strange sallow brightness began to spread over the floor, scattering itself about the room in a thousand scurrying shards that shone and squeaked. The little night beasts of the castle were glowing like fireflies. They darted here and there in the hall, raising swift shadows with their sickly light and making the darkness even colder than before.

"I wish you hadn't done that," Molly said. "Can you turn them off again? The purple ones, anyway, with the—with the legs, I guess."

"No, I can't," Schmendrick answered crossly. "Be quiet. Where's the skull?"

The Lady Amalthea could see it grinning from a pillar, lemon-small in the shadows and dim as the morning moon, but she said nothing. She had not spoken since she came down from the tower.

"There," the magician said. He strode to the skull and peered into its split and crumbling eyesockets for a long time, nodding slowly and making solemn sounds to himself. Molly Grue stared with equal earnestness, but she glanced often at the Lady Amalthea. At last Schmendrick said, "All right. Don't stand so close."

"Are there really spells to make a skull speak?" Molly asked. The magician stretched out his fingers and gave her a small, competent smile.

"There are spells to make everything speak. The master wizards were great listeners, and they devised ways to charm all things of the world, living and dead, into talking to them. That is most of it, being a wizard—seeing and listening." He drew a long breath, suddenly looking away and rubbing his hands together. "The rest is technique," he said. "Well. Here we go."

Abruptly he turned to face the skull, put one hand lightly on the pale crown, and addressed it in a deep, commanding voice. The words marched out of his mouth like soldiers, their steps echoing with power as they crossed the dark air, but the skull made no answer at all.

"I just wondered," the magician said softly. He lifted his hand from the skull and spoke to it again. This time the sound of the spell was reasonable and cajoling, almost plaintive. The skull remained silent, but it seemed to Molly that a wakefulness slipped across the faceless front and was gone again.

In the scuttling light of the radiant vermin, the Lady Amalthea's hair shone like a flower. Appearing neither interested nor indifferent, but quiet in the way that a battlefield is sometimes quiet, she watched as Schmendrick recited one incantation after another to a desert-colored knob of bone that spoke not one word more than she did. Each charm was uttered in a more despairing tone than the last, the skull would not speak. And yet Molly Grue was certain that it was aware and listening, and amused. She knew the silence of mockery too well to mistake it for death.

The clock struck twenty-nine—at least, it was at that point that Molly lost count. The rusty strokes were still clanking to the floor when Schmendrick suddenly shook both fists at the skull and shouted, "All right, all right for you, you pretentious kneecap! How would you like a punch in the eye?" On the last words, his voice unraveled completely into a snarl of misery and rage.

"That's right," the skull said. "Yell. Wake up old Haggard." Its own voice sounded like branches creaking and knocking together in the wind. "Yell louder," it said. "The old man's probably around here somewhere. He doesn't sleep much."

Molly gave a small cry of delight, and even the Lady Amalthea moved a step nearer. Schmendrick stood with his fists shut and no triumph in his face. The skull said, "Come on. Ask me how to find the Red Bull. You can't go wrong asking my advice. I'm the king's watchman, set to guard the way to the Bull. Even Prince Lír doesn't know the secret way, but I do."

A little timidly, Molly Grue asked, "If you are truly on guard here, why don't you give the alarm? Why do you offer to help us, instead of summoning the men-at-arms?"

The skull gave a rattling chuckle. "I've been upon this pillar a long time," it said. "I was Haggard's chief henchman once, until he smote off my head for no reason. That was back in the days when he was being wicked to see if that was what he really liked to do. It wasn't, but he thought he might as well get some use out of my head, so he stuck it up here to serve as his sentinel. Under the circumstances, I'm not as loyal to King Haggard as I might be."

Schmendrick spoke in a low voice. "Answer the riddle, then. Tell us the way to the Red Bull."

"No," said the skull. Then it laughed like mad.

"Why not?" Molly cried furiously. "What kind of game—?" The skull's long yellow jaws never moved, but it was some time before the mean laughter chattered to a halt. Even the hurrying night things paused for a moment, stranded in their candy light, until it stopped.

"I'm dead," said the skull. "I'm dead, and I'm hanging in the dark watching over Haggard's property. The only small amusement I have is to irk and exasperate the living, and I don't get much chance of that. It's a sad loss, because in life mine was a particularly exasperating nature. You'll pardon me, I'm sure, if I indulge myself with you a little. Try me tomorrow. Maybe I'll tell you tomorrow."

"But we have no time!" Molly pleaded. Schmendrick nudged her, but she rushed on, stepping close to the skull and appealing directly to its uninhabited eyes. "We have no time. We may be too late now."

"I have time," the skull replied reflectively. "It's really not so good to have time. Rush, scramble, desperation, this missed, that left behind, those others too big to fit into such a small space—that's the way life was meant to be. You're supposed to be too late for some things. Don't worry about it."

Molly would have entreated further, but the magician gripped her arm and pulled her aside. "Be still!" he said in a swift, fierce voice. "Not a word, not another word. The damned thing spoke, didn't it? Maybe that's all the riddle requires."

"It isn't," the skull informed him. "I'll talk as much as you like, but I won't tell you anything. That's pretty rotten, isn't it? You should have seen me when I was alive."

Schmendrick paid no attention. "Where's the wine?" he demanded of Molly. "Let me see what I can do with the wine."

"I couldn't find any," she said nervously. "I looked everywhere, but I don't think there's a drop in the castle." The magician glared at her in vast silence. "I *looked*," she said.

Schmendrick raised both arms slowly and let them fall to his sides. "Well," he said. "Well, that's it, then, if we can't find the wine. I have my illusions, but I can't make wine out of the air."

The skull giggled in a clacking, tocky way. "Matter can neither be created nor destroyed," it remarked. "Not by most magicians anyway."

From a fold in her dress Molly produced a small flask that gleamed faintly in the darkness. She said, "I thought if you had some water to start with . . ." Schmendrick and the skull gave her very much the same look. "Well, it's been done," she said loudly. "It's not as though you'd have to make up something new. I'd never ask that of you."

Hearing herself, she looked sideways at the Lady Amalthea; but Schmendrick took the flask from her hand and studied it thoughtfully, turning it over and murmuring curious, fragile words to himself. Finally he said, "Why not? As you say, it's a standard trick. There was quite a vogue for it at one time, I remember, but it's really a bit dated these days." He moved one hand slowly over the flask, weaving a word into the air.

"What are you doing?" the skull asked eagerly. "Hey, do it closer, do it over here. I can't see a thing." The magician turned away, holding the flask to his breast and bowing over it. He began a whispery chant that made Molly think of the sounds that a dead fire continues to make, long after the last coal has faded.

"You understand," he said, interrupting himself, "it won't be anything special. *Vin ordinaire,* if that." Molly nodded solemnly. Schmendrick said, "And it's usually too sweet; and how I'm supposed to get it to drink itself, I haven't the faintest idea." He took up the incantation again, even more softly, while the skull complained bitterly that it couldn't see or hear *anything*. Molly said something quiet and hopeful to the Lady Amalthea, who neither looked at her nor replied.

The chant stopped abruptly, and Schmendrick raised the flask to his lips. He sniffed at it first, muttering, "Weak, weak, hardly any bouquet at all. Nobody ever made good wine by magic." Then he tilted it to drink—then shook it, then stared at it; and then, with a small horrible smile, turned it over. Nothing ran out, nothing at all.

"That's done it," Schmendrick said almost cheerfully. He touched a dry tongue to his dry lips and repeated, "That's done it, that has finally done it." Still smiling, he lifted the flask again to hurl it across the hall.

"No, wait—hey, don't!" The skull's clattering voice protested so wildly that Schmendrick halted before the flask left his hand. He and Molly turned together to regard the skull, which—so great was its anguish—had actually begun to wriggle where it hung, cracking its weathered occiput hard against the pillar as it strove to free itself. "Don't do that!" it wailed. "You people must be crazy, throwing away wine like that. Give it to me if you don't want it, but don't throw it away!" It rocked and lurched on the pillar, whimpering.

A dreamy, wondering look crossed Schmendrick's face, rather like a raincloud drifting over dry country. Slowly he asked, "And what use have you for wine, with no tongue to taste it, no ribby palate to savor it, no gullet to gulp it down? Fifty years dead, can it be that you still remember, still desire—?"

"Fifty years dead, what else can I do?" The skull had ceased its grotesque twitching, but frustration had made its voice almost human. "I remember," it said. "I remember more than wine. Give me a swallow, that's all—give me a sip—and I'll taste it as you never will, with all your runny flesh, all your buds and organs. I've had time to think. I know what wine is like. Give it to me."

Schmendrick shook his head, grinning. He said, "Eloquent, but I've been feeling a bit spiteful myself lately." For a third time, he lifted the empty flask, and the skull groaned in mortal misery.

Out of pity, Molly Grue began to say, "But it isn't—" but the magician stepped on her foot. "Of course," he mused aloud, "if you should happen to remember the entrance to the Red Bull's cavern as well as you remember wine, we might bargain yet." He twiddled the flask casually between two fingers.

"Done!" the skull cried instantly. "Done, for a dram, but give it to me now! I am more thirsty with thinking of wine than ever I was in life, when I had a throat to be dry. Only give me a single swig now, and I'll tell you anything you want to know." The rusted jaws were beginning to grind sideways on each other. The skull's slaty teeth were trembling and splitting.

"Give it to him," Molly whispered to Schmendrick. She was terrified that the naked eyesockets might start to fill up with tears. But Schmendrick shook his head again.

"I will give it all to you," he said to the skull. "After you tell us how we may find the Bull."

The skull sighed, but never hesitated. "The way is through the clock," it said. "You simply walk through the clock and there you are. Now can I have the wine?"

"Through the clock." The magician turned to peer into a far corner of the great hall, where the clock stood. It was tall and black and thin, the sundown shadow of a clock. The glass over its face was broken, and the hour hand was gone. Behind gray glass, the works could barely be seen, twitching and turning as fretfully as fish. Schmendrick said, "You mean, when the clock strikes the right time it opens, and then there is a tunnel, a hidden stair." His voice was doubtful, for the clock seemed far too lean to conceal any such passageway.

"I don't know anything about that," the skull replied. "If you wait for this clock to strike the hour, you'll be here till you're as bald as I am. Why complicate a simple secret? You walk through the clock, and the Red Bull is on the other side. Gimme."

"But the cat said—" Schmendrick began. Then he turned and walked toward the clock. The darkness made him seem to be going away down a hill, growing small and stooped. When he reached the clock he kept walking without pause, as though it were truly no more than a shadow. But he bumped his nose.

"This is stupid," he said coldly to the skull as he returned. "How do you think to cheat us? The way to the Bull may well lead through the clock, but there is something more to know. Tell me, or I will spill the wine out on the floor, for you to remember the smell and look of it as much as you choose. Be quick!"

But the skull was laughing again; this time making a thoughtful, almost kindly noise. "Remember what I told you about time," it said. "When I was alive, I believed—as you do—that time was at least as real and solid as myself, and probably more so. I said 'one o'clock' as though I could see it, and 'Monday' as though I could find it on the map; and I let myself be hurried along from minute to minute, day to day, year to year, as though I were actually moving from one place to another. Like everyone else, I lived in a house bricked up with seconds and minutes, weekends and New Year's Days, and I never went outside until I died, because there was no other door. Now I know that I could have walked through the walls."

Molly blinked bewilderedly, but Schmendrick was nodding. "Yes," he said. "That's how the real magicians do it. But then the clock—"

"The clock will never strike the right time," the skull said. "Haggard scrambled the works long ago, one day when he was trying to grab hold of time as it swung by. But the important thing is for you to understand that it doesn't matter whether the clock strikes ten next, or seven, or fifteen o'clock. You can strike your own time, and start the count anywhere. When you understand that—then any time at all will be the right time for you."

At that moment, the clock struck four. The last bang had not yet faded when there came an answering sound from beneath the great hall. Neither a bellow nor the savage grumble that the Red Bull often made when he dreamed, it was a low, inquiring sound, as though the Bull had awakened sensing something new in the night. Every flagstone buzzed like a snake, and the darkness itself seemed to shudder as the glowing night creatures scampered wildly to the edges of the hall. Molly knew, suddenly and surely, that King Haggard was near.

"Give me the wine," the skull said. "I have kept my part of the bargain." Silently Schmendrick tipped the empty flask to the empty mouth, and the skull gurgled and sighed and smacked. "Ah," it said at last, "ah, that was the real stuff, that was *wine!* You're more of a magician than I took you for. Do you understand me now, about time?"

"Yes," Schmendrick answered. "I think so." The Red Bull made his curious sound again, and the skull rattled against the pillar. Schmendrick said, "No. I don't know. Is there no other way?"

"How can there be?" Molly heard footsteps; then nothing; then the thin, cautious ebb and flow of breathing. She could not tell where it came from. Schmendrick turned to her, and his face seemed to be smudged from within, like the inside of a lantern glass, with fear and confusion. There was a light too, but it shook like a lantern in a storm.

"I think I understand," he said, "but I'm sure I don't. I'll try."

"I still think it's a real clock," Molly said. "That's all right, though. I can walk through a real clock." She spoke partly to comfort him, but she felt a brightness in her own body as she realized that what she had said was true. "I know where we have to go," she said, "and that's as good as knowing the time any day."

The skull interrupted her. It said, "I'll give you a bit of advice in the bargain, because the wine was so good." Schmendrick looked guilty. The skull said, "Smash me. Just knock me to the floor and let me break in pieces. Don't ask why, just do it." It was speaking very quickly, almost whispering.

Together Schmendrick and Molly said, "What? Why?" The skull repeated its request. Schmendrick demanded, "What are you saying? Why on earth should we break you?"

"Do it!" the skull insisted. "Do it!" The sound of breath came nearer from all directions, though only on one pair of feet.

"No," Schmendrick said. "You're crazy." He turned his back and started a second time toward the gaunt, dark clock. Molly took the Lady Amalthea by her cold hand and followed him, trailing the white girl like a kite.

"All right," the skull said sadly. "I warned you." In a terrible voice, a voice like hail on iron, it began at once to cry, "Help ho, the king! Guards, to me! Here are burglars, bandits, mosstroopers, kidnapers, housebreakers, murderers, character assassins, plagiarists! King Haggard! Ho, King Haggard!"

Now over their heads and all around them, feet came clattering, and they heard the whistling voices of the aged men-at-arms calling as they ran. No torches flared, for no light could be struck in the castle unless the king himself ordered it, and Haggard was yet silent. The three thieves stood confounded and undone, gaping helplessly at the skull.

"I'm sorry," it said. "I'm just like that, treacherous. But I did try—" Then its vanished eyes suddenly saw the Lady Amalthea, and they went wide and bright, although they could not have. "Oh no," it said softly. "No, you don't. I'm disloyal, but I'm not *that* disloyal."

"Run," Schmendrick said, as he had said it long ago to the wild, sea-white legend that he had just set free. They fled across the great hall while the men-at-arms blundered loudly in the dark, and the skull shrieked, "Unicorn! Unicorn! Haggard, Haggard, there she goes, down to the Red Bull! Mind the clock, Haggard—where are you? Unicorn! Unicorn!"

Then the king's voice, rustling savagely under the uproar. "Fool, traitor, it was you who told her!" His quick, secret footsteps sounded close by, and Schmendrick set himself to turn and fight; but there came a grunt, and a crack, and a scraping noise, and then the bouncing crunch of old bone on old stone. The magician ran on.

When they stood before the clock, there was little grace either for doubting or understanding. The men-at-arms were in the hall now, and their clashing steps sent echoes booming back and forth between the walls, while King Haggard hissed and cursed them on. The Lady Amalthea never hesitated. She entered the clock and vanished as the moon passes behind clouds—hidden by them, but not in them, thousands of miles alone.

As though she were a dryad, Molly thought madly, and time were her tree. Through the dim, speckled glass Molly could see the weights and the pendulum and the cankered chimes, all swaying and burning as she stared. There was no door beyond, through which the Lady Amalthea might have gone. There was only the rusty avenue of the works, leading her eyes away into rain. The weights drifted from side to side like seaweed.

King Haggard was shouting, "Stop them! Smash the clock!" Molly started to turn her head, meaning to tell Schmendrick that she thought she knew what the skull had meant; but the magician had disappeared, and so had the hall of King Haggard. The clock was gone too, and she was standing beside the Lady Amalthea in a cold place.

The king's voice came to her from very far away, not so much heard as remembered. She went on turning her head, and found herself looking into the face of Prince Lír. Behind him there fell a bright mist, shivering like the sides of a fish, and bearing no resemblance at all to corroded clockwork. Schmendrick was nowhere to be seen.

Prince Lír bent his head gravely to Molly, but it was to the Lady Amalthea that he spoke first. "And you would have gone without me," he said. "You haven't been listening at all."

She answered him then, when she had not spoken to Molly or the magician. In a low, clear voice, she said, "I would have come back. I do not know why I am here, or who I am. But I would have come back."

"No," said the prince, "you would never have come back."

Before he could say anything more, Molly broke in—much to her own surprise—crying, "Never mind all that! Where's Schmendrick?" The two strangers looked at her in courteous wonder that anyone else in the world should be able to speak, and she felt herself shake once from head to heels. "Where is he?" she demanded. "I'll go back myself, if you won't," and she turned round again.

He came out of the mist, walking with his head down, as though he were leaning against a strong wind. He was holding a hand to his temple, and when he took it away the blood came softly down.

"It's all right," he said when he saw that the blood was falling on Molly Grue's hands. "It's all right, it's not deep. I couldn't get through until it happened." He bowed shakily to Prince Lír. "I thought it was you who went by me in the dark," he said. "Tell me, how did you pass through the clock so easily? The skull said you didn't know the way."

The prince looked puzzled. "What way?" he asked. "What was there to know? I saw where she had gone, and I followed."

Schmendrick's sudden laugh rubbed itself raw against the snaggy walls that came swimming in on them as their eyes grew familiar with this new darkness. "Of course," he said. "Some things have their own time by nature." He laughed again, shaking his head, and the blood flew. Molly tore a piece out of her dress.

"Those poor old men," the magician said. "They didn't want to hurt me, and I wouldn't have hurt them if I could. We dodged around and around, apologizing to each other, and Haggard was yelling, and I kept bumping into the clock. I knew that it wasn't a real clock, but it felt real, and I worried about it. Then Haggard came up with his sword and hit me." He closed his eyes as Molly bound his head. "Haggard," he said. "I was getting to like him. I still do. He looked so frightened." The dim, removed voices of the king and his men seemed to be growing louder.

"I don't understand," Prince Lír said. "Why was he frightened—my father? What did he—?" But just then from the far side of the clock, they heard a wordless squall of triumph and the beginning of a great crash. The shimmering haze vanished immediately, and black silence caved in on them all.

"Haggard has destroyed the clock," Schmendrick said presently. "Now there is no way back, and no way out but the Bull's way." A slow, thick wind began to wake.

XIII

THE WAY was wide enough for all of them to walk abreast, but they went one by one. The Lady Amalthea walked in front, by her own choosing. Prince Lír, Schmendrick, and Molly Grue, following, had only her hair for lantern, but she herself had no light before her at all. Yet she went on as easily as though she had been this way before.

Where they truly were, they never knew. The cold wind seemed real, as did the cold reek that rode it, and the darkness let them pass far more grudgingly than had the clock. The path itself was enough of a fact to bruise feet, and to be partly choked in places by real stones and real earth that had crumbled down the sides of the cave. But its course was the impossible way of a dream: pitched and skewed, rounding on itself; now dropping almost sheer, now seeming to rise a little; now working out and slowly down, and now wandering back to take them, perhaps, once again below the great hall where old King Haggard must still be raging over a toppled clock and a shivered skull. Witchwork, surely, Schmendrick thought, and nothing made by a witch is real, at the last. Then he added, But this must be the last. It will all be real enough if this is not the last.

As they stumbled along, he hurriedly told Prince Lír the tale of their adventures, beginning with his own strange history and stranger doom; recounting the ruin of the Midnight Carnival and his flight with the unicorn, and continuing through their meeting with Molly Grue, the journey to Hagsgate, and Drinn's story of the double curse on the town and the tower. Here he halted, for beyond lay the night of the Red Bull: a night that ended, for good or ill, with magic—and with a naked girl who struggled in her body like a cow in quicksand. He hoped that the prince would be more interested in learning of his heroic birth than in the origins of the Lady Amalthea.

Prince Lír marveled suspiciously, which is an awkward thing to manage. "I have known for a very long time that the king is not my father," he said. "But I tried hard to be his son all the same. I'm the enemy of any who plot against him, and it would take more than a crone's gibbering to make me work his downfall. As for the other, I think there are no unicorns any more, and I know that King Haggard has never seen one. How could any man who had looked upon a unicorn even once—let alone thousands with every tide—possibly be as sad as King Haggard is? Why, if I had only seen *her* once, and never again—" Now he himself paused in some confusion, for he also felt that the talk was going on to some sorrow from which it could never be called back. Molly's neck and shoulders were listening intently, but if the Lady Amalthea could hear what the two men were saying, she gave no sign.

"Yet the king has a joy hidden somewhere about his life," Schmendrick pointed out. "Have you never seen a trace of it, truly—never seen its track in his eyes? I have. Think for a moment, Prince Lír."

The prince was silent, and they wound further into the foul dark. They could not always tell whether they were climbing or descending, nor, sometimes, if the passage were bending once again, until the gnarly nearness of stone at their shoulders suddenly became the bleak rake of a wall against their faces. There was not the smallest sound of the Red Bull, or any glimmer of the wicked light; but when Schmendrick touched his damp face, the smell of the Bull came off on his fingers.

Prince Lír said, "Sometimes, when he has been on the tower, there is something in his face. Not a light, exactly, but a clearness. I remember. I was little, and he never looked like that when he looked at me, or at anything else. And I had a dream." He was walking very slowly now, scuffing his feet. "I used to have a dream," he said, "the same dream over and over, about standing at my window in the middle of the night and seeing the Bull, seeing the Red Bull—" He did not finish.

"Seeing the Bull driving unicorns into the sea," Schmendrick said. "It was no dream. Haggard has them all now drifting in and out on the tides for his delight—all but one." The magician drew a deep breath. "That one is the Lady Amalthea."

"Yes," Prince Lír answered him. "Yes, I know."

Schmendrick stared at him. "What do you mean, you know?" he demanded angrily. "How could you possibly know that the Lady Amalthea is a unicorn? She can't have told you, because she doesn't remember it herself. Since you took her fancy, she has thought only of being a mortal woman." He knew quite well that the truth was the other way around, but it made no difference to him just then. "How do you know?" he asked again.

Prince Lír stopped walking and turned to face him. It was too dark for Schmendrick to see anything but the cool, milky shining where his wide eyes were.

"I did not know what she was until now," he said. "But I knew the first time I saw her that she was something more than I could see. Unicorn, mermaid, lamia, sorceress, Gorgon—no name you give her would surprise me, or frighten me. I love whom I love."

"That's a very nice sentiment," Schmendrick said. "But when I change her back into her true self, so that she may do battle with the Red Bull and free her people—"

"I love whom I love," Prince Lír repeated firmly. "You have no power over anything that matters."

Before the magician could reply, the Lady Amalthea was standing between them, though neither man had seen or heard her as she came back along the passageway. In the darkness she gleamed and trembled like running water. She said, "I will go no farther."

It was to the prince that she spoke, but it was Schmendrick who said, "There is no choice. We can only go on." Molly Grue came nearer; one anxious eye and the pale start of a cheekbone. The magician said again, "We can only go on."

The Lady Amalthea would not look straight at him. "He must not change me," she said to Prince Lír. "Do not let him work his magic on me. The Bull has no care for human beings—we may walk out past him and get away. It is a unicorn the Bull wants. Tell him not to change me into a unicorn."

Prince Lír twisted his fingers until they cracked. Schmendrick said, "It is true. We might very well escape the Red Bull that way even now, as we escaped before. But if we do, there will never be another chance. All the unicorns of the world will remain his prisoners forever, except one, and she will die. She will grow old and die."

"Everything dies," she said, still to Prince Lír. "It is good that everything dies. I want to die when you die. Do not let him enchant me, do not let him make me immortal. I am no unicorn, no magical creature. I am human, and I love you."

He answered her, saying gently, "I don't know much about enchantments, except how to break them. But I know that even the very greatest wizards are powerless against two who keep to each other—and this one is only poor Schmendrick, after all. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of anything. Whatever you have been, you are mine now. I can hold you."

She turned to look at the magician at last, and even through the darkness he could feel the terror in her eyes. "No," she said. "No, we are not strong enough. He will change me, and whatever happens after that, you and I will lose each other. I will not love you when I am a unicorn, and you will love me only because you cannot help it. I will be more beautiful than anything in the world, and live forever."

Schmendrick began to speak, but the sound of his voice made her cower like a candle flame. "I will not have it. I will not have it so." She was looking back and forth from the prince to the magician, holding her voice together like the edges of a wound. She said, "If there is left a single moment of love when he changes me, you will know it, for I will let the Red Bull drive me into the sea with the others. Then at least I will be near you."

"There's no need for all that." Schmendrick spoke lightly, making himself laugh. "I doubt I could turn you back if you wished it. Nikos himself never could turn a human being into a unicorn—and you are truly human now. You can love, and fear, and forbid things to be what they are, and overact. Let it end here then, let the quest end. Is the world any the worse for losing the unicorns, and would it be any better if they were running free again? One good woman more in the world is worth every single unicorn gone. Let it end. Marry the prince and live happily ever after."

The passageway seemed to be growing lighter, and Schmendrick imagined the Red Bull stealing toward them, grotesquely cautious, setting his hoofs down as primly as a heron. The thin glimmer of Molly Grue's cheekbone went out as she turned her face away. "Yes," said the Lady Amalthea. "That is my wish."

But at the same moment, Prince Lír said, "No."

The word escaped him as suddenly as a sneeze, emerging in a questioning squeak—the voice of a silly young man mortally embarrassed by a rich and terrible gift. "No," he repeated, and this time the word tolled in another voice, a king's voice: not Haggard, but a king whose grief was not for what he did not have, but for what he could not give.

"My lady," he said, "I am a hero. It is a trade, no more, like weaving or brewing, and like them it has its own tricks and knacks and small arts. There are ways of perceiving witches, and of knowing poison streams; there are certain weak spots that all dragons have, and certain riddles that hooded strangers tend to set you. But the true secret of being a hero lies in knowing the order of things. The swineherd cannot already be wed to the princess when he embarks on his adventures, nor can the boy knock at the witch's door when she is away on vacation. The wicked uncle cannot be found out and foiled before he does something wicked. Things must happen when it is time for them to happen. Quests may not simply be abandoned; prophecies may not be left to rot like unpicked fruit; unicorns may go unrescued for a long time, but not forever. The happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story."

The Lady Amalthea did not answer him. Schmendrick asked, "Why not? Who says so?"

"Heroes," Prince Lír replied sadly. "Heroes know about order, about happy endings—heroes know that some things are better than others. Carpenters know grains and shingles, and straight lines." He put his hands out to the Lady Amalthea, and took one step toward her. She did not draw back from him, nor turn her face; indeed, she lifted her head higher, and it was the prince who looked away.

"You were the one who taught me," he said. "I never looked at you without seeing the sweetness of the way the world goes together, or without sorrow for its spoiling. I became a hero to serve you, and all that is like you. Also to find some way of starting a conversation." But the Lady Amalthea spoke no word to him.

Pale as lime, the brightness was rising in the cavern. They could see one another clearly now, each gone tallowy and strange with fear. Even the beauty of the Lady Amalthea drained away under that dull, hungry light. She looked more mortal than any of the other three.

"The Bull is coming," Prince Lír said. He turned and set off down the passageway, taking the bold, eager strides of a hero. The Lady Amalthea followed him, walking as lightly and proudly as princesses are taught to try to walk. Molly Grue stayed close to the magician, taking his hand as she had been used to touch the unicorn when she was lonely. He smiled down at her, looking quite pleased with himself.

Molly said, "Let her stay the way she is. Let her be."

"Tell that to Lír," he replied cheerfully. "Was it I who said that order is all? Was it I who said that she must challenge the Red Bull because it will be more proper and precise that way? I have no concern for regulated rescues and official happy endings. That's Lír."

"But you made him do it," she said. "You know that all he wants in the world is to have her give up her quest and stay with him. And he would have done it, but you reminded him that he is a hero, and now he has to do what heroes do. He loves her, and you tricked him."

"I never," Schmendrick said. "Be quiet, he'll hear you." Molly felt herself growing light-headed, silly with the nearness of the Bull. The light and the smell had become a sticky sea in which she floundered like the unicorns, hopeless and eternal. The path was beginning to tilt downward, into the deepening light; and far ahead Prince Lír and the Lady Amalthea went marching along to disaster as calmly as candles burning down. Molly Grue snickered.

She went on, "I know why you did it too. You can't become mortal yourself until you change her back again. Isn't that it? You don't care what happens to her, or to the others, just as long as you become a real magician at last. Isn't that it? Well, you'll never be a real magician, even if you change the Bull into a bullfrog, because it's still just a trick when you do it. You don't care about anything but magic, and what kind of magician is that? Schmendrick, I don't feel good. I have to sit down."

Schmendrick must have carried her for a time, because she was definitely not walking and his green eyes were ringing in her head. "That's right. Nothing but magic matters to me. I would round up unicorns for Haggard myself if it would heighten my power by half a hair. It's true. I have no preferences and no loyalties. I have only magic." His voice was hard and sad.

"Really?" she asked, rocking dreamily in her terror, watching the brightness flowing by. "That's awful." She was very impressed. "Are you really like that?"

"No," he said, then or later. "No, it's not true. How could I be like that, and still have all these troubles?" Then he said, "Molly, you have to walk now. He's there. He's there."

Molly saw the horns first. The light made her cover her face, but the pale horns struck bitterly through hands and eyelids to the back of her mind. She saw Prince Lír and the Lady Amalthea standing before the horns, while the fire flourished on the walls of the cavern and soared up into the roofless dark. Prince Lír had drawn his sword, but it blazed up in his hand, and he let it fall, and it broke like ice. The Red Bull stamped his foot, and everyone fell down.

Schmendrick had thought to find the Bull waiting in his lair, or in some wide place with room enough to do battle. But he had come silently up the passageway to meet them; and now he stood across their sight, not only from one burning wall to the other, but somehow in the walls themselves, and beyond them, bending away forever. Yet he was no mirage, but the Red Bull still, steaming and snuffling, shaking his blind head. His jaws champed over his breath with a terrible wallowing sound.

Now. Now is the time, whether I work ruin or great good. This is the end of it. The magician rose slowly to his feet, ignoring the Bull, listening only to his cupped self, as to a seashell. But no power stirred or spoke in him; he could hear nothing but the far, thin howling of emptiness against his ear; as old King Haggard must have heard it waking and sleeping, and never another sound. *It will not come to me. Nikos was wrong. I am what I seem.*

The Lady Amalthea had stepped back a pace from the Bull, but no more, and she was regarding him quietly as he pawed with his front feet and snorted great, rumbling, rainy blasts out of his vast nostrils. He seemed puzzled about her, and almost foolish. He did not roar. The Lady Amalthea stood in his freezing light with her head tipped back to see all of him. Without turning her head, she put her hand out to find Prince Lír's hand.

Good, good. There is nothing I can do, and I am glad of it. The Bull will let her by, and she will go away with Lír. It is as right as anything. I am only sorry about the unicorns. The prince had not yet noticed her offered hand, but in a moment he would turn and see, and touch her for the first time. *He will never know what she has given him, but neither will she.* The Red Bull lowered his head and charged.

He came without warning, with no sound but the rip of his hoofs; and if he had chosen, he could have crushed all four of them in that one silent onslaught. But he let them scatter before him and flatten themselves into the wrinkled walls; and he went by without harming them, though he might easily have horned them out of their shallow shelters like so many periwinkles. Supple as fire, he turned where there was no room to turn and met them again, his muzzle almost touching the ground, his neck swelling like a wave. It was then that he roared.

They fled and he followed: not as swiftly as he had charged, but quickly enough to keep each one alone, friendless in the wild dark. The ground tore under their feet, and they cried out, but they could not even hear themselves. Every bellow of the Red Bull brought great slides of stones and earth shuddering down on them; and still they scrambled along like broken insects and still he came after them. Through his mad blaring they heard another sound: the deep whine of the castle itself as it strained at its roots, drumming like a flag in the wind of his wrath. And very faintly there drifted up the passageway the smell of the sea.

He knows, he knows! I fooled him once that way, but not again. Woman or unicorn, he will hunt her into the sea this time, as he was bidden, and no magic of mine will turn him from it. Haggard has won.

So the magician thought as he ran, all hope gone for the first time in his long, strange life. The way widened suddenly and they emerged into a kind of grotto that could only have been the Bull's den. The stench of his sleeping hung so thick and old here that it had a loathly sweetness about it; and the cave brooded gullet-red, as though his light had rubbed off on the walls and crusted in the cracks and crevices. Beyond lay the tunnel again, and the dim gleam of breaking water.

The Lady Amalthea fell as irrevocably as a flower breaks. Schmendrick leaped to one side, wheeling to drag Molly Grue with him. They brought up hard against a split slab of rock, and there they crouched together as the Red Bull raged by without turning. But he came to a halt between one stride and the next; and the sudden stillness—broken only by the Bull's breathing and the distant grinding of the sea—would have been absurd, but for the cause of it.

She lay on her side with one leg bent beneath her. She moved slowly, but she made no sound. Prince Lír stood between her body and the Bull, weaponless, but with his hands up as though they still held a sword and shield. Once more in that endless night, the prince said, "No."

He looked very foolish, and he was about to be trampled flat. The Red Bull could not see him, and would kill him without ever knowing that he had been in the way. Wonder and love and great sorrow shook Schmendrick the Magician then, and came together inside him and filled him, filled him until he felt himself brimming and flowing with something that was none of these. He did not believe it, but it came to him anyway, as it had touched him twice before and left him more barren than he had been. This time, there was too much of it for him to hold: it spilled through his skin, sprang from his fingers and toes, welled up equally in his eyes and his hair and the hollows of his shoulders. There was too much to hold, too much ever to use; and still he found himself weeping with the pain of his impossible greed. He thought, or said, or sang, *I did not know that I was so empty, to be so full.*

The Lady Amalthea lay where she had fallen, though now she was trying to rise, and Prince Lír still guarded her, raising his naked hands against the enormous shape that loomed over him. The tip of the prince's tongue stuck out of one corner of his mouth, making him look as serious as a child taking something apart. Long years later, when Schmendrick's name had become a greater name than Nikos's and worse than afreets surrendered at the sound of it, he was never able to work the smallest magic without seeing Prince Lír before him, his eyes squinted up because of the brightness and his tongue sticking out.

The Red Bull stamped again, and Prince Lír fell on his face and got up bleeding. The Bull's rumble began, and the blind, bloated head started down, lowering like one half of the scales of doom. Lír's valiant heart hung between the pale horns, as good as dripping from their tips, himself as good as smashed and scattered: and his mouth buckled a little, but he never moved. The sound of the Bull grew louder as the horns went down.

Then Schmendrick stepped into the open and said a few words. They were short words, undistinguished either by melody or harshness, and Schmendrick himself could not hear them for the Red Bull's dreadful bawling. But he knew what they meant, and he knew exactly how to say them, and he knew that he could say them again when he wanted to, in the same way or in a different way. Now he spoke them gently and with joy, and as he did so he felt his immortality fall from him like armor, or like a shroud.

At the first word of the spell, the Lady Amalthea gave a thin, bitter cry. She reached out again to Prince Lír, but he had his back to her, protecting her, and he did not hear. Molly Grue, heartsick, caught at Schmendrick's arm but the magician spoke on. Yet even when the wonder blossomed where she had been—sea-white, sea-white, as boundlessly beautiful as the Bull was mighty—still the Lady Amalthea clung to herself for a moment more. She was no longer there, and yet her face hovered like a breath in the cold, reeky light.

It would have been better if Prince Lír had not turned until she was gone, but he turned. He saw the unicorn, and she shone in him as in a glass, but it was to the other that he called—to the castaway, to the Lady Amalthea. His voice was the end of her: she vanished when he cried her name, as though he had crowed for day.

Things happened both swiftly and slowly as they do in dreams, where it is really the same thing. The unicorn stood very still, looking at them all out of lost, elsewhere eyes. She seemed even more beautiful than Schmendrick remembered. for no one can keep a unicorn in his head for long; and yet she was not as she had been, no more than he was. Molly Grue started toward her, speaking softly and foolishly, but the unicorn gave no sign that she knew her. The marvelous horn remained dull as rain.

With a roar that set the walls of his lair belling out and cracking like circus canvas, the Red Bull charged for the second time. The unicorn fled across the cave and into darkness. Prince Lír, in turning had stepped a little to one side, and before he could wheel back again, the Bull's plunging pursuit smashed him down, stunned, with his mouth open.

Molly would have gone to him, but Schmendrick took hold of her and dragged her along after the Bull and the unicorn. Neither beast was in sight, but the tunnel still thundered from their desperate passage. Dazed and bewildered, Molly stumbled beside the fierce stranger who would neither let her fall nor slacken her pace. Over her head and all around, she could feel the castle groaning, creaking in the rock like a loosening tooth. The witch's rhyme jangled in her memory, over and over.

"Yet none but one of Hagsgate town
May bring the castle swirling down."

Suddenly it was sand slowing their feet, and the smell of the sea—cold as the other smell, but so good, so friendly that they both stopped running and laughed aloud. Above them, on the cliff, King Haggard's castle splayed up toward a gray-green morning sky splashed with thin, milky clouds. Molly was sure that the king himself must be watching from one of the tremulous towers, but she could not see him. A few stars still fluttered in the heavy blue sky over the water. The tide was out, and the bald beach had the gray, wet gleam of a stripped shellfish, but far down the strand the sea was bending like a bow, and Molly knew that the ebb had ended.

The unicorn and the Red Bull stood facing each other at the arch of the bow, and the unicorn's back was to the sea. The Bull moved in slowly, not charging, but pressing her almost gently toward the water, never touching her. She did not resist him. Her horn was dark, and her head was down, and the Bull was as much her master as he had been on the plain of Hagsgate, before she became the Lady Amalthea. It might have been that same hopeless dawn, except for the sea.

Yet she was not altogether beaten. She backed away until one hind foot actually stepped into the water. At that, she sprang through the sullen smolder of the Red Bull and ran away along the beach: so swift and light that the wind of her passing blew her footprints off the sand. The Bull went after her.

"Do something," a hoarse voice said to Schmendrick, as Molly had said it long ago. Prince Lír stood behind him, his face bloody and his eyes mad. He looked like King Haggard. "Do something," he said. "You have power. You changed her into a unicorn—do something now to save her. I will kill you if you don't." He showed the magician his hands.

"I cannot," Schmendrick answered him quietly. "Not all the magic in the world can help her now. If she will not fight him, she must go into the sea with the others. Neither magic nor murder will help her."

Molly heard small waves slapping on the sand—the tide was beginning to turn. She saw no unicorns tumbling in the water, though she looked for them, willing them to be there. What if it is too late? What if they drifted out on the last ebb tide, out to the deepest sea where no ships go, because of the kraken and the sea-drake, and because of the floating jungles of wrack that tangle and drown even these? She will never find them then. Would she stay with me?

"Then what is magic for?" Prince Lír demanded wildly. "What use is wizardry if it cannot save a unicorn?" He gripped the magician's shoulder hard, to keep from falling.

Schmendrick did not turn his head. With a touch of sad mockery in his voice, he said, "That's what heroes are for."

They could not see the unicorn for the hugeness of the Bull; but suddenly she doubled on her track and came flying up the beach toward them. Blind and patient as the sea, the Red Bull followed her, his hoofs gouging great ditches in the damp sand. Smoke and fire, spray and storm, they came on together, neither one gaining, and Prince Lír gave a soft grunt of understanding.

"Yes, of course," he said. "That is exactly what heroes are for. Wizards make no difference, so they say that nothing does, but heroes are meant to die for unicorns." He let go of Schmendrick's shoulder, smiling to himself.

"There is a basic fallacy in your reasoning," Schmendrick began indignantly, but the prince never heard what it was. The unicorn flashed by them—her breath steaming blue-white and her head carried too high—and Prince Lír leaped into the path of the Red Bull. For a moment, he disappeared entirely, like a feather in a flame. The Bull ran over him and left him lying on the ground. One side of his face cuddled too hard into the sand, and one leg kicked the air three times before it stopped.

He fell without a cry, and Schmendrick and Molly alike were stricken as silent as he, but the unicorn turned. The Red Bull halted when she did, and wheeled to put her once more between himself and the sea. He began his mincing, dancing advance again, but he might have been a courting bird for all the attention the unicorn paid him. She stood motionless, staring at the twisted body of Prince Lír.

The tide was grumbling in hard now, and the beach was already a slice narrower. Whitecaps and skipper's-daughters spilled up into the sprawling dawn, but Molly Grue still saw no other unicorn but her own. Over the castle, the sky was scarlet, and on the highest tower King Haggard stood up as clear and black as a winter tree. Molly could see the straight scar of his mouth, and his nails darkening as he gripped the parapet. But the castle cannot fall now. Only Lír could have made it fall.

Suddenly the unicorn screamed. It was not at all like the challenging bell with which she had first met the Red Bull; it was an ugly, squawking wail of sorrow and loss and rage, such as no immortal creature ever gave. The castle quaked, and King Haggard shrank back with one arm across his face. The Red Bull hesitated, shuffling in the sand, lowing doubtfully.

The unicorn cried out again and reared up like a scimitar. The sweet sweep of her body made Molly close her eyes, but she opened them again in time to see the unicorn leap at the Red Bull, and the Bull swerve out of her way. The unicorn's horn was light again, burning and shivering like a butterfly.

Again she charged, and again the Bull gave ground, heavy with perplexity but still quick as a fish. His own horns were the color and likeness of lightning, and the slightest swing of his head made her stagger; but he retreated and retreated, backing steadily down the beach, as she had done. She lunged after him, driving to kill, but she could not reach him. She might have been stabbing at a shadow, or at a memory.

So the Red Bull fell back without giving battle, until she had stalked him to the water's edge. There he made his stand, with the surf swirling about his hoofs and the sand rushing away under them. He would neither fight nor fly, and she knew now that she could never destroy him. Still she set herself for another charge, while he muttered wonderingly in his throat.

For Molly Grue, the world hung motionless in that glass moment. As though she were standing on a higher tower than King Haggard's, she looked down on a pale paring of land where a toy man and woman stared with their knitted eyes at a clay bull and a tiny ivory unicorn. Abandoned playthings—there was another doll, too, half-buried; and a sandcastle with a stick king propped up in one tilted turret. The tide would take it all in a moment, and nothing would be left but the flaccid birds of the beach, hopping in circles.

Then Schmendrick shook her back to his side, saying, "Molly." Far out to sea, the combers were coming in: the long, heavy rollers, curling over white across their green hearts; tearing themselves to smoke on the sandbars and the slimy rocks, rasping up the beach with a sound like fire. The birds flew up in yelling clumps, their strident outrage lost in the cry of the waves like pins.

And in the whiteness, of the whiteness, flowering in the tattered water, their bodies aching with the streaked marble hollows of the waves, their manes and tails and the fragile beards of the males burning in the sunlight, their eyes as dark and jeweled as the deep sea—and the shining of the horns, the seashell shining of the horns! The horns came riding in like the rainbow masts of silver ships.

But they would not come to land while the Bull was there. They rolled in the shallows, swirling together as madly as frightened fish when the nets are being hauled up; no longer with the sea, but losing it. Hundreds were borne in with each swell and hurled against the ones already struggling to keep from being shoved ashore, and they in their turn struck out desperately, rearing and stumbling, stretching their long, cloudy necks far back.

The unicorn lowered her head one last time and hurled herself at the Red Bull. If he had been either true flesh or a windy ghost, the blow would have burst him like rotten fruit. But he turned away unnoticing, and walked slowly into the sea. The unicorns in the water floundered wildly to let him by, stamping and slashing the surf into a roiling mist which their horns turned rainbow; but on the beach, and atop the cliff, and up and down through all of Haggard's kingdom, the land sighed when his weight had passed from it.

He strode out a long way before he began to swim. The hugest waves broke no higher than his hocks, and the timid tide ran away from him. But when at last he let himself sink onto the flood, then a great surge of the sea stood up behind him: a green and black swell, as deep and smooth and hard as the wind. It gathered in silence, folding from one horizon to the other, until for a moment it actually hid the Red Bull's humped shoulders and sloping back. Schmendrick lifted the dead prince, and he and Molly ran until the cliff face stopped them. The wave fell like a cloudburst of chains.

Then the unicorns came out of the sea.

Molly never saw them clearly—they were a light leaping toward her and a cry that dazzled her eyes. She was wise enough to know that no mortal was ever meant to see all the unicorns in the world, and she tried to find her own unicorn and look only at her. But there were too many of them, and they were too beautiful. Blind as the Bull, she moved to meet them, holding out her arms.

The unicorns would surely have run her down, as the Red Bull had trampled Prince Lír, for they were mad with freedom. But Schmendrick spoke, and they streamed to the right and left of Molly and Lír and himself—some even springing over them—as the sea shatters on a rock and then comes whirling together again. All around Molly there flowed and flowered a light as impossible as snow set afire, while thousands of cloven hoofs sang by like cymbals. She stood very still, neither weeping nor laughing, for her joy was too great for her body to understand.

"Look up," Schmendrick said. "The castle is falling."

She turned and saw that the towers were melting as the unicorns sprang up the cliff and flowed around them, exactly as though they had been made out of sand and the sea were sliding in. The castle came down in great cold chunks that turned thin and waxen as they swirled in the air, until they disappeared. It crumbled and vanished without a sound, and it left no ruins, either on land or in the memories of the two who watched it fall. A minute later, they could not remember where it had stood, or how it had looked.

But King Haggard, who was quite real, fell down through the wreckage of his disenchanted castle like a knife dropped through clouds. Molly heard him laugh once, as though he had expected it. Very little ever surprised King Haggard.

XIV

Once the sea had taken back their diamond-shaped footprints, there was no sign that they had ever been there, any more than King Haggard's castle had been. The only difference was that Molly Grue remembered unicorns very well.

"It's good that she went without saying good-by," she said to herself. "I would have been stupid. I'm going to be stupid in a minute, anyway, but it really is better like this." Then a warmth moved over her cheek and into her hair, like sunlight, and she turned and put her arms around the unicorn's neck.

"Oh, you stayed!" she whispered, "you stayed!" She was about to be very foolish then, and ask, "Will you stay?" but the unicorn slipped gently from her and moved to where

Prince Lír lay with his dark blue eyes already losing their color. She stood over him, as he had guarded the Lady Amalthea.

"She can restore him," Schmendrick said softly. "A unicorn's horn is proof against death itself." Molly looked closely at him, as she had not done for a long time, and she saw that he had come at last to his power and his beginning. She could not say how she knew, for no wild glory burned about him, and no recognizable omens occurred in his honor, just at that moment. He was Schmendrick the Magician, as ever—and yet somehow it was for the first time.

It was long that the unicorn stood by Prince Lír before she touched him with her horn. For all that her quest had ended joyously, there was weariness in the way she held herself, and a sadness in her beauty that Molly had never seen. It suddenly seemed to her that the unicorn's sorrow was not for Lír but for the lost girl who could not be brought back; for the Lady Amalthea, who might have lived happily ever after with the prince. The unicorn bowed her head, and her horn glanced across Lír's chin as clumsily as a first kiss.

He sat up blinking, smiling at something long ago. "Father," he said in a quick wondering voice. "Father, I had a dream." Then he saw the unicorn, and he rose to his feet as the blood on his face began to shine and move again. He said, "I was dead."

The unicorn touched him a second time, over the heart, letting her horn rest there for a little space. They were both trembling. Prince Lír put his hands out to her like words. She said, "I remember you. I remember."

"When I was dead—" Prince Lír began, but she was away. Not a stone rattled down after her, not a bush tore out as she sprang up the cliff: she went as lightly as the shadow of a bird; and when she looked back, with one cloven foot poised, and the sunlight on her sides, with her head and neck absurdly fragile for the burden of the horn—then each of the three below called to her in pain. She turned and vanished; but Molly Grue saw their voices thump home into her like arrows, and even more than she wished the unicorn back, she wished that she had not called.

Prince Lír said, "As soon as I saw her, I knew that I had been dead. It was so the other time, when I looked down from my father's tower and saw her." He glanced up then and drew in his breath. It was the only sound of grief for King Haggard that any living thing ever made.

"Was it I?" he whispered. "The curse said that I would be the one to bring the castle down, but I would never have done it. He was not good to me, but it was only because I was not what he wanted. Is it my doing that he is fallen?"

Schmendrick replied, "If you had not tried to save the unicorn, she would never have turned on the Red Bull and driven him into the sea. It was the Red Bull who made the overflow, and so set the other unicorns free, and it was they who destroyed the castle. Would you have it otherwise, knowing this?"

Prince Lír shook his head, but he said nothing. Molly asked, "But why did the Bull run from her? Why didn't he stand and fight?"

There was no sign of him when they looked out to sea, though he was surely too vast to have swum out of sight in so short a time. But whether he reached some other shore, or whether the water drew even his great bulk down at last, none of them knew until long after; and he was never seen again in that kingdom.

"The Red Bull never fights," Schmendrick said. "He conquers, but he never fights."

He turned to Prince Lír and put a hand on his shoulder. "Now you are the king," he said. He touched Molly as well, said something that was more of a whistle than a word, and the three of them floated up the air like milkweed plumes to the top of the cliff. Molly was not frightened. The magic lifted her as gently as though she were a note of music and it were singing her. She could feel that it was never very far from being wild and dangerous, but she was sorry when it set her down.

No stone of the castle remained, nor any scar; the earth was not even a shade paler where it had stood. Four young men in rusty, ragged armor wandered gaping through the vanished corridors, and turned around and around in the absence that had been the great hall. When they saw Lír, Molly, and Schmendrick, they came running toward them, laughing. They fell on their knees before Lír and cried out together, "Your majesty! Long live King Lír!"

Lír blushed, and actually tried to pull them to their feet. "Never mind that," he mumbled, "never mind that. Who are you?" He peered in amazement from one face to the next. "I know you—I do know you—but how can it be?"

"It is true, Your Majesty," the first of the young men said happily. "We are indeed King Haggard's men-at-arms—the same who served him for so many cold and weary years. We fled the castle after you disappeared into the clock, for the Red Bull was roaring, and all the towers were trembling, and we were afraid. We knew that the old curse must be coming home at last."

"A great wave took the castle," said a second man-at-arms, "exactly as the witch foretold. I saw it go spilling down the cliff as slowly as snow, and why we did not go with it, I cannot tell."

"The wave parted to go around us," another man said, "as I never saw any wave do. It was strange water, like the ghost of a wave, boiling with a rainbow light, and for a moment it seemed to me—" He rubbed his eyes and shrugged, and smiled helplessly. "I don't know. It was like a dream."

"But what has happened to you all?" Lír demanded. "You were old men when I was born, and now you are younger than I am. What miracle is this?"

The three who had spoken giggled and looked embarrassed, but the fourth man replied, "It is the miracle of meaning what we said. Once we told the Lady Amalthea that we would grow young again if she wished it so, and we must have been telling the truth. Where is she? We will go to her aid if it means facing the Red Bull himself."

King Lír said, "She is gone. Find my horse and saddle him. Find my horse." His voice was harsh and hungry, and the men-at-arms scrambled to obey their new lord.

But Schmendrick, standing behind him, said quietly, "Your Majesty, it may not be. You must not follow her."

The king turned and he looked like Haggard. "Magician, she is mine!" He paused, and then went on in a gentler tone, close to pleading. "She has twice raised me up from death, and what will I be without her but dead for a third time?" He took Schmendrick by the wrists with a grip strong enough to powder bones, but the magician did not move. Lír said, "I am not King Haggard. I have no wish to capture her, but only to spend my life following after her—miles, leagues, even years behind—never seeing her, perhaps, but content. It is my right. A hero is entitled to his happy ending, when it comes at last."

But Schmendrick answered, "This is not the end, either for you or for her. You are the king of a wasted land where there has never been any king but fear. Your true task has just begun, and you may not know in your life if you have succeeded in it, but only if you fail. As for her, she is a story with no ending, happy or sad. She can never belong to anything mortal enough to want her."

Most strangely then, he put his arms around the young king and held him so for a time. "Yet be content, my lord," he said in a low voice. "No man has ever had more of her grace than you, and no other will ever be blessed by her remembrance. You have loved her and served her—be content, and be king."

"But that is not what I want!" Lír cried. The magician answered not a word, but only looked at him. Blue eyes stared back into green; a face grown lean and lordly into one neither so handsome nor so bold. The king began to squint and blink, as though he were gazing at the sun, and it was not long before he lowered his eyes and muttered, "So be it. I will stay and rule alone over a wretched people in a land I hate. But I will have no more joy of my rule than poor Haggard ever had."

A small autumn cat with a crooked ear stalked out of some secret fold in the air and yawned at Molly. She caught him up against her face, and he tangled his paws in her hair. Schmendrick smiled, and said to the king, "We must leave you now. Will you come with us and see us in friendship to the edge of your domain? There is much between here and there that is worth your study—and I can promise you that there will be some sign of unicorns."

Then King Lír shouted for his horse again, and his men searched for it and found it; but there were none for Schmendrick and Molly. Yet when they came back with the king's horse, they turned at his amazed stare and saw two more horses trailing docilely behind them: one black and one brown, and both already saddled and bridled. Schmendrick took the black for himself, and gave the brown horse to Molly.

She was afraid of them at first. "Are they yours?" she asked him. "Did you make them? Can you do that now—just make things?" The king's whisper echoed her wonder.

"I found them," the magician answered. "But what I mean by finding is not what you mean. Ask me no more." He lifted her into the saddle, and then leaped up himself.

So the three of them rode away, and the men-at-arms followed on foot. No one looked back, for there was nothing to see. But King Lír said once, without turning, "It is strange to have grown to manhood in a place, and then to have it gone, and everything changed—and suddenly to be king. Was none of it real at all? Am I real, then?" Schmendrick made no reply.

King Lír wished to go swiftly, but Schmendrick held them to a leisurely pace and a roundabout road. When the king fretted for speed, he was admonished to consider his walking men—though they, marvelously, never tired for all the length of the journey. But Molly soon understood that the magician was delaying in order to make Lír gaze long and closely at his realm. And to her own surprise, she discovered that the land was worth the look.

For, very slowly, spring was coming to the barren country that had been Haggard's. A stranger would not have noticed the change, but Molly could see that the withered earth was brightening with a greenness as shy as smoke. Squat, snaggly trees that had never yet bloomed were putting forth flowers in the wary way an army sends out scouts; long-dry streams were beginning to rustle in their beds, and small creatures were calling to one another. Smells slipped by in ribbons: pale grass and black mud, honey and walnuts, mint and hay and rotting applewood; and even the afternoon sunlight had a tender, sneezy scent that Molly would have known anywhere. She rode beside Schmendrick, watching the gentle advent of the spring and thinking of how it had come to her, late but lasting.

"Unicorns have passed here," she whispered to the magician. "Is that the cause, or is it Haggard's fall and the Red Bull's going? What is it, what is happening?"

"Everything," he answered her, "everything, all at once. It is not one springtime, but fifty; and not one or two great terrors flown away, but a thousand small shadows lifted from the land. Wait and see."

Speaking for Lír's ear, he added, "Nor is this the first spring that ever has been in this country. It was a good land long ago, and it wants little but a true king to be so again. See how it softens before you."

King Lír said nothing, but his eyes roved left and right as he rode, and he could not but observe the ripening. Even the valley of Hagsgate, of evil memory, was stirring with all manner of wildflowers—columbine and harebell, lavender and lupine, foxglove and yarrow. The rutted footprints of the Red Bull were growing mellow with mallow.

But when they came to Hagsgate, deep in the afternoon, a strange and savage sight awaited them. The plowed fields were woefully torn and ravaged, while the rich orchards and vineyards had been stamped down, leaving no grove or arbor standing. It was such shattering ruin as the Bull himself might have wrought; but it seemed to Molly Grue as though fifty years' worth of foiled griefs had struck Hagsgate all at once, just as that many springtimes were at last warming the rest of the land. The trampled earth looked oddly ashen in the late light.

King Lír said quietly, "What is this?"

"Ride on, Your Majesty," the magician replied. "Ride on."

The sun was setting as they passed through the overthrown gates of the town and guided their horses slowly down streets that were choked with boards and belongings and broken glass; with pieces of walls and windows, chimneys, chairs, kitchenware, roofs, bathtubs, beds, mantels, dressing tables. Every house in Hagsgate was down; everything that could be broken was. The town looked as though it had been stepped on.

The people of Hagsgate sat on their doorsteps wherever they could find them, considering the wreckage. They had always had the air of paupers, even in the midst of plenty, and real ruin made them appear almost relieved, and no whit poorer. They hardly noticed Lír when he rode up to them, until he said, "I am the king. What has befallen you here?"

"It was an earthquake," one man murmured dreamily, but another contradicted him, saying, "It was a storm, a nor'easter straight off the sea. It shook the town to bits, and hail came down like hoofs." Still another man insisted that a mighty tide had washed over Hagsgate; a tide as white as dogwood and heavy as marble, that drowned none and smashed everything. King Lír listened to them all, smiling grimly.

"Listen," he said when they were done. "King Haggard is dead, and his castle has fallen. I am Lír, the son of Hagsgate who was abandoned at birth in order to keep the witch's curse from coming true, and *this* from happening." He swept an arm around him at the burst houses. "Wretched, silly people, the unicorns have returned—the unicorns, that you saw the Red Bull hunting, and pretended not to see. It was they who brought the castle down, and the town as well. But it is your greed and your fear that have destroyed you."

The townsfolk sighed in resignation, but a middle-aged woman stepped forward and said with some spirit, "It all seems a bit unfair, my lord, begging your pardon. What could we have done to save the unicorns? We were afraid of the Red Bull. What could we have done?"

"One word might have been enough," King Lír replied. "You'll never know now."

He would have wheeled his horse and left them there, but a feeble, roupy voice called to him, "Lír—little Lír—my child, my king!" Molly and Schmendrick recognized the man who came shuffling up with his arms open, wheezing and limping as though he were older than he truly was. It was Drinn.

"Who are you?" the king demanded. "What do you want of me?"

Drinn pawed at his stirrups, nuzzling his boots. "You don't know me, my boy? No—how should you? How should I deserve to have you know me? I am your father—your poor old overjoyed father. I am the one who left you in the marketplace on that winter night long ago, and handed you over to your heroic destiny. How wise I was, and how sad for so long, and how proud I am now! My boy, my little boy!" He could not quite cry real tears, but his nose was running.

Without a word, King Lír tugged at his horse's reins, backing him out of the crowd. Old Drinn let his outstretched arms drop to his sides. "This is what it is to have children!" he screeched. "Ungrateful son, will you desert your father in the hour of his distress, when a word from your pet wizard would have set everything right again? Despise me if you will, but I have played my part in putting you where you are, and you dare not deny it! Villainy has its rights too."

Still the king would have turned away, but Schmendrick touched his arm and leaned near. "It's true, you know," he whispered. "But for him—but for them all—the tale would have worked out quite another way, and who can say that the ending would have been even as happy as this? You must be their king, and you must rule them as kindly as you would a braver and more faithful folk. For they are a part of your fate."

Then Lír lifted his hand to the people of Hagsgate, and they pushed and elbowed one another for silence. He said, "I must ride with my friends and keep them company for a way. But I will leave my men-at-arms here, and they will help you begin to build your town again. When I return, in a little time, I also will help. I will not begin to build my new castle until I see Hagsgate standing once more."

They complained bitterly that Schmendrick could do it all in a moment by means of his magic. But he answered them, "I could not, even if I would. There are laws that govern the wizard's art, as laws command the seasons and the sea. Magic made you wealthy once, when all others in the land were poor;

but your days of prosperity are ended, and now you must start over. What was wasteland in Haggard's time shall grow green and generous again, but Hagsgate will yield a living exactly as miserly as the hearts that dwell there. You may plant your acres again, and raise up your fallen orchards and vineyards, but they will never flourish as they used to, never—until you learn to take joy in them, for no reason."

He gazed on the silent townsfolk with no anger in his glance, but only pity. "If I were you, I would have children," he said; and then to King Lír, "How says your Majesty? Shall we sleep here tonight and be on our way at dawn?"

But the king turned and rode away out of ruined Hagsgate as fast as he could spur. It was long before Molly and the magician came up with him, and longer still before they lay down to sleep.

For many days they journeyed through King Lír's domain, and each day they knew it less and delighted in it more. The spring ran on before them as swiftly as fire, clothing all that was naked and opening everything that had long ago shut up tight, touching the earth as the unicorn had touched Lír. Every sort of animal, from bears to black beetles, came sporting or shambling or scurrying along their way, and the high sky, that had been as sandy and arid as the soil itself, now blossomed with birds, swirling so thickly that it seemed like sunset most of the day. Fish bent and flickered in the whisking streams, and wildflowers raced up and down the hills like escaped prisoners. All the land was noisy with life, but it was the silent rejoicing of the flowers that kept the three travelers awake at night.

The folk of the villages greeted them cautiously, and with little less dourness than they had shown when Schmendrick and Molly first came that way. Only the oldest among them had ever seen the spring before, and many suspected the rampaging greenness of being a plague or an invasion. King Lír told them that Haggard was dead and the Red Bull gone forever, invited them to visit him when his new castle was raised, and passed on. "They will need time to feel comfortable with flowers," he said.

Wherever they stopped, he left word that all outlaws were pardoned, and Molly hoped that the news would come to Captain Cully and his merry band. As it happened it did, and all the merry band immediately abandoned the life of the greenwood, saving only Cully himself and Jack Jingly. Together they took up the trade of wandering minstrels and were reported to have become reasonably popular in the provinces.

One night, the three slept at the farthest frontier of Lír's kingdom, making their beds in high grass. The king would bid them farewell in the morning and return to Hagsgate. "It will be lonely," he said in the darkness. "I would rather go with you, and not be king."

"Oh, you'll get to like it," Schmendrick replied. "The best young men of the village will make their way to your court, and you will teach them to be knights and heroes. The wisest of ministers will come to counsel you, the most skillful musicians and jugglers and storytellers will come seeking your favor. And there will be a princess, in time—either fleeing her unspeakably wicked father and brothers, or seeking justice for them. Perhaps you will hear of her, shut away in a fortress of flint and adamant, her only companion a compassionate spider—"

"I don't care about that," King Lír said. He was silent for so long that Schmendrick thought he had fallen asleep, but presently he said, "I wish I could see her once more, to tell her all my heart. She will never know what I really meant to say. You did promise that I would see her."

The magician answered him sharply. "I promised only that you would see some sign of unicorns, and so you have. Your realm is blessed beyond any land's deserving because they have passed across it in freedom. As for you and your heart and the things you said and didn't say, she will remember them all when men are fairy tales in books written by rabbits. Think of that, and be still." The king spoke no more after that, and Schmendrick repented of his words.

"She touched you twice," he said in a little while. "The first touch was to bring you to life again, but the second was for you." Lír did not answer, and the magician never knew if he had heard or not.

Schmendrick dreamed that the unicorn came and stood by him at moonrise. The thin night wind lifted and spilled her mane, and the moon shone on the snowflake crafting of her small head. He knew it was a dream, but he was happy to see her. "How beautiful you are," he said. "I never really told you." He would have roused the others, but her eyes sang him a warning as clearly as two frightened birds, and he knew that if he moved to call Molly and Lír he would wake himself, and she would vanish. So he said only, "They love you more, I think, though I do the best I can."

"That is why," she said, and he could not tell what she was answering. He lay very still, hoping that he would remember the exact shape of her ears when he did wake in the morning. She said, "You are a true and mortal wizard now, as you always wished. Does it make you happy?"

"Yes," he replied with a quiet laugh. "I'm not poor Haggard, to lose my heart's desire in the having of it. But there are wizards and wizards; there is black magic and white magic, and the infinite shades of gray between—and I see now that it is all the same. Whether I decide to be what men would call a wise and good magician—aiding heroes, thwarting witches, wicked lords, and unreasonable parents; making rain, curing woolsorter's disease and the mad staggers, getting cats down from trees—or whether I choose the retorts full of elixirs and essences, the powders and herbs and banes, the padlocked books of gramarye bound in skins better left unnamed, the muddy mist darkening in the chamber and the sweet voice lisping therein—why, life is short, and how many can I help or harm? I have my power at last, but the world is still too heavy for me to move, though my friend Lír might think otherwise." And he laughed again in his dream, a little sadly.

The unicorn said, "That is true. You are a man, and men can do nothing that makes any difference." But her voice was strangely slow and burdened. She asked, "Which will you choose?"

The magician laughed for a third time. "Oh, it will be the kind magic, undoubtedly, because you would like it more. I do not think that I will ever see you again, but I will try to do what would please you if you knew. And you—where will you be for the rest of my life? I thought you would have gone home to your forest by now."

She turned a little away from him, and the sudden starlight of her shoulders made all his talk of magic taste like sand in his throat. Moths and midges and other night insects too small to be anything in particular came and danced slowly around her bright horn, and this did not make her appear foolish, but them most wise and lovely as they celebrated her. Molly's cat rubbed in and out between her forefeet.

"The others have gone," she said. "They are scattered to the woods they came from, no two together, and men will not catch sight of them much more easily than if they were still in the sea. I will go back to my forest too, but I do not know if I will live contentedly there, or anywhere. I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret, but I do. I regret."

Schmendrick hid his face like a child, though he was a great magician. "I am sorry, I am sorry," he mumbled into his wrist. "I have done you evil, as Nikos did to the other unicorn, with the same good will, and I can no more undo it than he could. Mommy Fortuna and King Haggard and the Red Bull together were kinder to you than I."

But she answered him gently, saying, "My people are in the world again. No sorrow will live in me as long as that joy—save one, and I thank you for that, too. Farewell, good magician. I will try to go home."

She made no sound when she left him, but he was awake, and the crook-eared cat was miaowing lonesomely. Turning his head, he saw the moonlight trembling in the open eyes of King Lír and Molly Grue. The three of them lay awake till morning, and nobody said a word.

At dawn, King Lír rose up and saddled his horse. Before he mounted, he said to Schmendrick and Molly, "I would like it if you came to see me one day." They assured him that they would, but still he lingered with them, twisting the dangling reins about his fingers.

"I dreamed about her last night!" he said.

Molly cried, "So did I!" and Schmendrick opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

King Lír said hoarsely, "By our friendship, I beg you—tell me what she said to you." His hands gripped one hand each of theirs, and his clutch was cold and painful.

Schmendrick gave him a weak smile. "My lord, I so rarely remember my dreams. It seems to me that we spoke solemnly of silly things, as one does—grave nonsense, empty and evanescent—" The king let go of his hand and turned his half-mad gaze on Molly Grue.

"I'll never tell," she said, a little frightened, but flushing oddly. "I remember, but I'll never tell anyone, if I die for it—not even you, my lord." She was not looking at him as she spoke, but at Schmendrick.

King Lír let her hand fall as well, and he swung himself into the saddle so fiercely that his horse reared up across the sunrise, bugling like a stag. But Lír kept his seat and glared down at Molly and Schmendrick with a face so grim and scored and sunken that he might well have been king as long as Haggard before him.

"She said nothing to me," he whispered. "Do you understand? She said nothing to me, nothing at all."

Then his face softened, as even King Haggard's face had gone a little gentle when he watched the unicorns in the sea. For that moment he was again the young prince who had liked to sit with Molly in the scullery. He said, "She looked at me. In my dream, she looked at me and never spoke."

He rode away without good-by, and they watched after him until the hills hid him: a straight, sad horseman, going home to be king. Molly said at last, "Oh, the poor man. Poor Lír."

"He has not fared so badly," the magician answered. "Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed. It is all part of the fairy tale." But his voice was a little doubtful, and he laid his arm softly around Molly's shoulders. "It cannot be an ill fortune to have loved a unicorn," he said. "Surely it must be the dearest luck of all, though the hardest earned."

By and by, he put her as far from him as his fingers' ends and asked her, "Now will you tell me what it was she said to you?" But Molly Grue only laughed and shook her head till her hair came down, and she was more beautiful than the Lady Amalthea. The magician said, "Very well. Then I'll find the unicorn again, and perhaps she will tell me." And he turned calmly to whistle up their steeds.

She said no word while he saddled his horse, but when he began on her own she put her hand on his arm. "Do you think —do you truly hope that we may find her? There was something I forgot to say."

Schmendrick looked at her over his shoulder. The morning sunlight made his eyes seem gay as grass; but now and then, when he stooped into the horse's shadow, there stirred a deeper greenness in his gaze—the green of pine needles that has a faint, cool bitterness about it. He said, "I fear it, for her sake. It would mean that she too is a wanderer now, and that is a fate for human beings, not for unicorns. But I hope, of course I hope." Then he smiled at Molly and took her hand in his. "Anyway, since you and I must choose one road to follow, out of the many that run to the same place in the end, it might as well be a road that a unicorn has taken. We may never see her, but we will always know where she has been. Come, then. Come with me."

So they began their new journey, which took them in its time in and out of most of the folds of the sweet, wicked, wrinkled world, and so at last to their own strange and wonderful destiny. But that was all later, and first, not ten minutes out of Lír's kingdom, they met a maiden who came hurrying toward them on foot. Her dress was torn and smirched, but the richness of its making was still plain to see, and though her hair was tumbled and brambled, her arms scratched, and her fair face dirty, there was no mistaking her for anyone but a princess in woeful distress. Schmendrick lighted down to support her, and she clutched him with both hands as though he were a grapefruit hull.

"A rescue!" she cried to him, "a rescue, *au secours!* An ye be a man of mettle and sympathy, aid me now. I hight the Princess Alison Jocelyn, daughter to good King Giles, and him foully murdered by his brother, the bloody Duke Wulf, who hath ta'en my three brothers, the Princes Corin, Colin, and Calvin, and cast them into a fell prison as hostages that I will wed with his fat son, the Lord Dudley, but I bribed the sentinel and sopped the dogs—"

But Schmendrick the Magician raised his hand, and she fell silent, staring up at him in wonder out of wide lilac eyes. "Fair princess," he said gravely to her, "the man you want just went that way," and he pointed back toward the land they had so lately quitted. "Take my horse and you will be up with him while your shadow is still behind you."

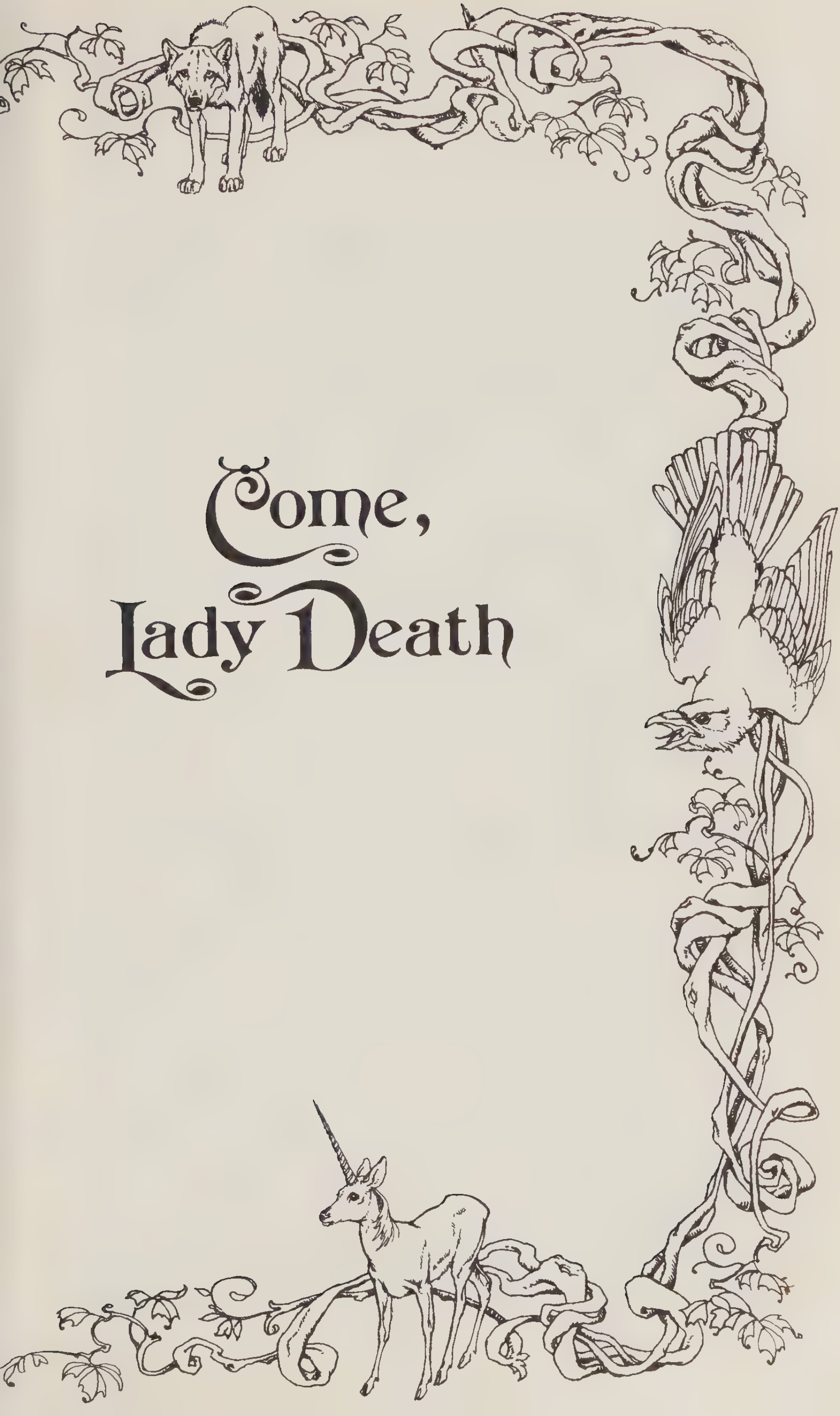
He cupped his hands for the Princess Alison Jocelyn, and she climbed wearily and in some bewilderment to the saddle. Schmendrick turned the horse, saying, "You will surely overtake him with ease, for he will be riding slowly. He is a good man, and a hero greater than any cause is worth. I send all my princesses to him. His name is Lír."

Then he slapped the horse on the rump and sent it off the way King Lír had gone; and then he laughed for so long that he was too weak to get up behind Molly and had to walk beside her horse for a while. When he caught his breath again, he began to sing, and she joined with him. And this is what they sang as they went away together, out of this story and into another:

" 'I am no king, and I am no lord,
And I am no soldier at arms,' said he.
'I'm none but a harper, and a very poor harper,
That am come hither to wed with ye.'

" 'If you were a lord, you should be my lord,
And the same if you were a thief,' said she.
'And if you are a harper, you shall be my harper,
For it makes no matter to me, to me,
For it makes no matter to me.'

" 'But what if it prove that I am no harper?
That I lied for your love most monstrously?'
'Why, then I'll teach you to play and sing,
For I dearly love a good harp,' said she."



Come, Lady Death

THIS ALL HAPPENED in England a long time ago, when that George who spoke English with a heavy German accent and hated his sons was King. At that time there lived in London a lady who had nothing to do but give parties. Her name was Flora, Lady Neville, and she was a widow and very old. She lived in a great house not far from Buckingham Palace, and she had so many servants that she could not possibly remember all their names; indeed, there were some she had never even seen. She had more food than she could eat, more gowns than she could ever wear; she had wine in her cellars that no one would drink in her lifetime, and her private vaults were filled with great works of art that she did not know she owned. She spent the last years of her life giving parties and balls to which the greatest lords of England—and sometimes the King himself—came, and she was known as the wisest and wittiest woman in all London.

But in time her own parties began to bore her, and though she invited the most famous people in the land and hired the greatest jugglers and acrobats and dancers and magicians to entertain them, still she found her parties duller and duller. Listening to court gossip, which she had always loved, made her yawn. The most marvelous music, the most exciting feats of magic put her to sleep. Watching a beautiful young couple dance by her made her feel sad, and she hated to feel sad.

And so, one summer afternoon she called her closest friends around her and said to them, "More and more I find that my parties entertain everyone but me. The secret of my long life is that nothing has ever been dull for me. For all my life, I have been interested in everything I saw and been anxious to see more. But I cannot stand to be bored, and I will not go to parties at which I expect to be bored, especially if they are my own. Therefore, to my next ball I shall invite the one guest I am sure no one, not even myself, could possibly find boring. My friends, the guest of honor at my next party shall be Death himself!"

A young poet thought that this was a wonderful idea, but the rest of her friends were terrified and drew back from her. They did not want to die, they pleaded with her. Death would come for them when he was ready; why should she invite him before the appointed hour, which would arrive soon enough? But Lady Neville said, "Precisely. If Death has planned to take any of us on the night of my party, he will come whether he is invited or not. But if none of us are to die, then I think it would be charming to have Death among us—perhaps even to perform some little trick if he is in a good humor. And think of being able to say that we had been to a party with Death! All of London will envy us, all of England!"

The idea began to please her friends, but a young lord, very new to London, suggested timidly, "Death is so busy. Suppose he has work to do and cannot accept your invitation?"

"No one has ever refused an invitation of mine," said Lady Neville, "not even the King." And the young lord was not invited to her party.

She sat down then and there and wrote out the invitation. There was some dispute among her friends as to how they should address Death. "His Lordship Death" seemed to place him only on the level of a viscount or a baron. "His Grace Death" met with more acceptance, but Lady Neville said it sounded hypocritical. And to refer to Death as "His Majesty" was to make him the equal of the King of England, which even Lady Neville would not dare to do. It was finally decided that all should speak of him as "His Eminence Death," which pleased nearly everyone.

Captain Compson, known both as England's most dashing cavalry officer and most elegant rake, remarked next, "That's all very well, but how is the invitation to reach Death? Does anyone here know where he lives?"

"Death undoubtedly lives in London," said Lady Neville, "like everyone else of any importance, though he probably goes to Deauville for the summer. Actually, Death must live fairly near my own house. This is much the best section of London, and you could hardly expect a person of Death's importance to live anywhere else. When I stop to think of it, it's really rather strange that we haven't met before now, on the street."

Most of her friends agreed with her, but the poet, whose name was David Lorimond, cried out, "No, my lady, you are wrong! Death lives among the poor. Death lives in the foulest, darkest alleys of this city, in some vile, rat-ridden hovel that smells of—" He stopped here, partly because Lady Neville had indicated her displeasure, and partly because he had never been inside such a hut or thought of wondering what it smelled like. "Death lives among the poor," he went on, "and comes to visit them every day, for he is their only friend."

Lady Neville answered him as coldly as she had spoken to the young lord. "He may be forced to deal with them, David, but I hardly think that he seeks them out as companions. I am certain that it is as difficult for him to think of the poor as individuals as it is for me. Death is, after all, a nobleman."

There was no real argument among the lords and ladies that Death lived in a neighborhood at least as good as their own, but none of them seemed to know the name of Death's street, and no one had ever seen Death's house.

"If there were a war," Captain Compson said, "Death would be easy to find. I have seen him, you know, even spoken to him, but he has never answered me."

"Quite proper," said Lady Neville. "Death must always speak first. You are not a very correct person, Captain." But she smiled at him, as all women did.

Then an idea came to her. "My hairdresser has a sick child, I understand," she said. "He was telling me about it yesterday, sounding most dull and hopeless. I will send for him and give him the invitation, and he in his turn can give it to Death when he comes to take the brat. A bit unconventional, I admit, but I see no other way."

"If he refuses?" asked a lord who had just been married.

"Why should he?" asked Lady Neville.

Again it was the poet who exclaimed amidst the general approval that this was a cruel and wicked thing to do. But he fell silent when Lady Neville innocently asked him, "Why, David?"

So the hairdresser was sent for, and when he stood before them, smiling nervously and twisting his hands to be in the same room with so many great lords, Lady Neville told him the errand that was required of him. And she was right, as she usually was, for he made no refusal. He merely took the invitation in his hand and asked to be excused.

He did not return for two days, but when he did he presented himself to Lady Neville without being sent for and handed her a small white envelope. Saying, "How very nice of you, thank you very much," she opened it and found therein a plain calling card with nothing on it except these words: *Death will be pleased to attend Lady Neville's ball.*

"Death gave you this?" she asked the hairdresser eagerly. "What was he like?" But the hairdresser stood still, looking past her, and said nothing, and she, not really waiting for an answer, called a dozen servants to her and told them to run and summon her friends. As she paced up and down the room waiting for them, she asked again, "What is Death like?" The hairdresser did not reply.

When her friends came they passed the little card excitedly from hand to hand, until it had gotten quite smudged and bent from their fingers. But they all admitted that, beyond its message, there was nothing particularly unusual about it. It was neither hot nor cold to the touch, and what little odor clung to it was rather pleasant. Everyone said that it was a very familiar smell, but no one could give it a name. The poet said that it reminded him of lilacs but not exactly.

It was Captain Compson, however, who pointed out the one thing that no one else had noticed. "Look at the handwriting itself," he said. "Have you ever seen anything more graceful? The letters seem as light as birds. I think we have wasted our time speaking of Death as His This and His That. A woman wrote this note."

Then there was an uproar and a great babble, and the card had to be handed around again so that everyone could exclaim, "Yes, by God!" over it. The voice of the poet rose out of the hubbub saying, "It is very natural, when you come to think of it. After all, the French say *la mort*. Lady Death. I should much prefer Death to be a woman."

"Death rides a great black horse," said Captain Compson firmly, "and wears armor of the same color. Death is very tall, taller than anyone. It was no woman I saw on the battlefield, striking right and left like any soldier. Perhaps the hairdresser wrote it himself, or the hairdresser's wife."

But the hairdresser refused to speak, though they gathered around him and begged him to say who had given him the note. At first they promised him all sorts of rewards, and later they threatened to do terrible things to him. "Did you write this card?" he was asked, and "Who wrote it, then? Was it a living woman? Was it really Death? Did Death say anything to you? How did you know it was Death? Is Death a woman? Are you trying to make fools of us all?"

Not a word from the hairdresser, not one word, and finally Lady Neville called her servants to have him whipped and thrown into the street. He did not look at her as they took him away, or utter a sound.

Silencing her friends with a wave of her hand, Lady Neville said, "The ball will take place two weeks from tonight. Let Death come as Death pleases, whether as man or woman or strange, sexless creature." She smiled calmly. "Death may well be a woman," she said. "I am less certain of Death's form than I was, but I am also less frightened of Death. I am too old to be afraid of anything that can use a quill pen to write me a letter. Go home now, and as you make your preparations for the ball see that you speak of it to your servants, that they may spread the news all over London. Let it be known that on this one night no one in the world will die, for Death will be dancing at Lady Neville's ball."

For the next two weeks Lady Neville's great house shook and groaned and creaked like an old tree in a gale as the servants hammered and scrubbed, polished and painted, making ready for the ball. Lady Neville had always been very proud of her house, but as the ball drew near she began to be afraid that it would not be nearly grand enough for Death, who was surely accustomed to visiting in the homes of richer, mightier people than herself. Fearing the scorn of Death, she worked night and day supervising her servants' preparations. Curtains and carpets had to be cleaned, goldwork and silverware polished until they gleamed by themselves in the dark. The grand staircase that rushed down into the ballroom like a waterfall was washed and rubbed so often that it was almost impossible to walk on it without slipping. As for the ballroom itself, it took thirty-two servants working at once to clean it properly, not counting those who were polishing the glass chandelier that was taller than a man and the fourteen smaller lamps. And when they were done she made them do it all over, not because she saw any dust or dirt anywhere, but because she was sure that Death would.

As for herself, she chose her finest gown and saw to its laundering personally. She called in another hairdresser and had him put up her hair in the style of an earlier time, wanting to show Death that she was a woman who enjoyed her age and did not find it necessary to ape the young and beautiful. All the day of the ball she sat before her mirror, not making herself up much beyond the normal touches of rouge and eye shadow and fine rice powder, but staring at the lean old face she had been born with, wondering how it would appear to Death. Her steward asked her to approve his wine selection, but she sent him away and stayed at her mirror until it was time to dress and go downstairs to meet her guests.

Everyone arrived early. When she looked out of a window, Lady Neville saw that the driveway of her home was choked with carriages and fine horses. "It all looks like a great funeral procession," she said. The footman cried the names of her guests to the echoing ballroom. "Captain Henry Compson, His Majesty's Household Cavalry! Mr. David Lorimond! Lord and Lady Torrance!" (They were the youngest couple there, having been married only three months before.) "Sir Roger Harbison! The Contessa della Candini!" Lady Neville permitted them all to kiss her hand and made them welcome.

She had engaged the finest musicians she could find to play for the dancing, but though they began to play at her signal not one couple stepped out on the floor, nor did one young lord approach her to request the honor of the first dance, as was proper. They milled together, shining and murmuring, their eyes fixed on the ballroom door. Every time they heard a carriage clatter up the driveway they seemed to flinch a little and draw closer together; every time the footman announced the arrival of another guest, they all sighed softly and swayed a little on their feet with relief.

"Why did they come to my party if they were afraid?" Lady Neville muttered scornfully to herself. "I am not afraid of meeting Death. I ask only that Death may be impressed by the magnificence of my house and the flavor of my wines. I will die sooner than anyone here, but I am not afraid."

Certain that Death would not arrive until midnight, she moved among her guests, attempting to calm them, not with her words, which she knew they would not hear, but with the tone of her voice, as if they were so many frightened horses. But little by little, she herself was infected by their nervousness: whenever she sat down she stood up again immediately, she tasted a dozen glasses of wine without finishing any of them, and she glanced constantly at her jeweled watch, at first wanting to hurry the midnight along and end the waiting, later scratching at the watch face with her forefinger, as if she would push away the night and drag the sun backward into the sky. When midnight came, she was standing with the rest of them, breathing through her mouth, shifting from foot to foot, listening for the sound of carriage wheels turning in gravel.

When the clock began to strike midnight, everyone, even Lady Neville and the brave Captain Compson, gave one startled little cry and then was silent again, listening to the tolling of the clock. The smaller clocks upstairs began to chime. Lady Neville's ears hurt. She caught sight of herself in the ballroom mirror, one gray face turned up toward the ceiling as if she were gasping for air, and she thought, "Death will be a woman, a hideous, filthy old crone as tall and strong as a man. And the most terrible thing of all will be that she will have my face." All the clocks stopped striking, and Lady Neville closed her eyes.

She opened them again only when she heard the whispering around her take on a different tone, one in which fear was fused with relief and a certain chagrin. For no new carriage stood in the driveway. Death had not come.

The noise grew slowly louder; here and there people were beginning to laugh. Near her, Lady Neville heard young Lord Torrance say to his wife, "There, my darling, I told you there was nothing to be afraid of. It was all a joke."

"I am ruined," Lady Neville thought. The laughter was increasing; it pounded against her ears in strokes, like the chiming of the clocks. "I wanted to give a ball so grand that those who were not invited would be shamed in front of the whole city, and this is my reward. I am ruined, and I deserve it."

Turning to the poet Lorimond, she said, "Dance with me, David." She signaled to the musicians, who at once began to play. When Lorimond hesitated, she said, "Dance with me now. You will not have another chance. I shall never give a party again."

Lorimond bowed and led her out onto the dance floor. The guests parted for them, and the laughter died down for a moment, but Lady Neville knew that it would soon begin again. "Well, let them laugh," she thought. "I did not fear Death when they were all trembling. Why should I fear their laughter?" But she could feel a stinging at the thin lids of her eyes, and she closed them once more as she began to dance with Lorimond.

And then, quite suddenly, all the carriage horses outside the house whinnied loudly, just once, as the guests had cried out at midnight. There were a great many horses, and their one salute was so loud that everyone in the room became instantly silent. They heard the heavy steps of the footman as he went to open the door, and they shivered as if they felt the cool breeze that drifted into the house. Then they heard a light voice saying, "Am I late? Oh, I am so sorry. The horses were tired," and before the footman could re-enter to announce her, a lovely young girl in a white dress stepped gracefully into the ballroom doorway and stood there smiling.

She could not have been more than nineteen. Her hair was yellow, and she wore it long. It fell thickly upon her bare shoulders that gleamed warmly through it, two limestone islands rising out of a dark golden sea. Her face was wide at the forehead and cheekbones, and narrow at the chin, and her skin was so clear that many of the ladies there—Lady Neville among them—touched their own faces wonderingly, and instantly drew their hands away as though their own skin had rasped their fingers. Her mouth was pale, where the mouths of the other women were red and orange and even purple. Her eyebrows, thicker and straighter than was fashionable, met over dark, calm eyes that were set so deep in her young face and were so black, so uncompromisingly black, that the middle-aged wife of a middle-aged lord murmured, "Touch of the gypsy there, I think."

"Or something worse," suggested her husband's mistress.

"Be silent!" Lady Neville spoke louder than she had intended, and the girl turned to look at her. She smiled, and Lady Neville tried to smile back, but her mouth seemed very stiff. "Welcome," she said. "Welcome, my lady Death."

A sigh rustled among the lords and ladies as the girl took the old woman's hand and curtsied to her, sinking and rising in one motion, like a wave. "You are Lady Neville," she said. "Thank you so much for inviting me." Her accent was as faint and as almost familiar as her perfume.

"Please excuse me for being late," she said earnestly. "I had to come from a long way off, and my horses are so tired."

"The groom will rub them down," Lady Neville said, "and feed them if you wish."

"Oh, no," the girl answered quickly. "Tell him not to go near the horses, please. They are not really horses, and they are very fierce."

She accepted a glass of wine from a servant and drank it slowly, sighing softly and contentedly. "What good wine," she said. "And what a beautiful house you have."

"Thank you," said Lady Neville. Without turning, she could feel every woman in the room envying her, sensing it as she could always sense the approach of rain.

"I wish I lived here," Death said in her low, sweet voice. "I will, one day."

Then, seeing Lady Neville become as still as if she had turned to ice, she put her hand on the old woman's arm and said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I am so cruel, but I never mean to be. Please forgive me, Lady Neville. I am not used to company, and I do such stupid things. Please forgive me."

Her hand felt as light and warm on Lady Neville's arm as the hand of any other young girl, and her eyes were so appealing that Lady Neville replied, "You have said nothing wrong. While you are my guest, my house is yours."

"Thank you," said Death, and she smiled so radiantly that the musicians began to play quite by themselves, with no sign from Lady Neville. She would have stopped them, but Death said, "Oh, what lovely music! Let them play, please."

So the musicians played a gavotte, and Death, unabashed by eyes that stared at her in greedy terror, sang softly to herself without words, lifted her white gown slightly with both hands, and made hesitant little patting steps with her small feet. "I have not danced in so long," she said wistfully. "I'm quite sure I've forgotten how."

She was shy; she would not look up to embarrass the young lords, not one of whom stepped forward to dance with her. Lady Neville felt a flood of shame and sympathy, emotions she thought had withered in her years ago. "Is she to be humiliated at my own ball?" she thought angrily. "It is because she is Death; if she were the ugliest, foulest hag in all the world they would clamor to dance with her, because they are gentlemen and they know what is expected of them. But no gentleman will dance with Death, no matter how beautiful she is." She glanced sideways at David Lorimond. His face was flushed, and his hands were clasped so tightly as he stared at Death that his fingers were like glass, but when Lady Neville touched his arm he did not turn, and when she hissed, "David!", he pretended not to hear her.

Then Captain Compson, gray-haired and handsome in his uniform, stepped out of the crowd and bowed gracefully before Death. "If I may have the honor," he said.

"Captain Compson," said Death, smiling. She put her arm in his. "I was hoping you would ask me."

This brought a frown from the older women, who did not consider it a proper thing to say, but for that Death cared not a rap. Captain Compson led her to the center of the floor, and there they danced. Death was curiously graceless at first—she was too anxious to please her partner, and she seemed to have no notion of rhythm. The Captain himself moved with the mixture of dignity and humor that Lady Neville had never seen in another man, but when he looked at her over Death's shoulder, she saw something that no one else appeared to notice: that his face and eyes were immobile with fear, and that, though he offered Death his hand with easy gallantry, he flinched slightly when she took it. And yet he danced as well as Lady Neville had ever seen him.

"Ah, that's what comes of having a reputation to maintain," she thought. "Captain Compson too must do what is expected of him. I hope someone else will dance with her soon."

But no one did. Little by little, other couples overcame their fear and slipped hurriedly out on the floor when Death was looking the other way, but nobody sought to relieve Captain Compson of his beautiful partner. They danced every dance together. In time, some of the men present began to look at her with more appreciation than terror, but when she returned their glances and smiled at them, they clung to their partners as if a cold wind were threatening to blow them away.

One of the few who stared at her frankly and with pleasure was young Lord Torrance, who usually danced only with his wife. Another was the poet Lorimond. Dancing with Lady Neville, he remarked to her, "If she is Death, what do these frightened fools think they are? If she is ugliness, what must they be? I hate their fear. It is obscene."

Death and the Captain danced past them at that moment, and they heard him say to her, "But if that was truly you that I saw in the battle, how can you have changed so? How can you have become so lovely?"

Death's laughter was gay and soft. "I thought that among so many beautiful people it might be better to be beautiful. I was afraid of frightening everyone and spoiling the party."

"They all thought she would be ugly," said Lorimond to Lady Neville. "I—*I* knew she would be beautiful."

"Then why have you not danced with her?" Lady Neville asked him. "Are you also afraid?"

"No, oh, no," the poet answered quickly and passionately. "I will ask her to dance very soon. I only want to look at her a little longer."

The musicians played on and on. The dancing wore away the night as slowly as falling water wears down a cliff. It seemed to Lady Neville that no night had ever endured longer, and yet she was neither tired nor bored. She danced with every man there, except with Lord Torrance, who was dancing with his wife as if they had just met that night, and, of course, with Captain Compson. Once he lifted his hand and touched Death's golden hair very lightly. He was a striking man still, a fit partner for so beautiful a girl, but Lady Neville looked at his face each time she passed him and realized that he was older than anyone knew.

Death herself seemed younger than the youngest there. No woman at the ball danced better than she now, though it was hard for Lady Neville to remember at what point her awkwardness had given way to the liquid sweetness of her movements. She smiled and called to everyone who caught her eye—and she knew them all by name; she sang constantly, making up words to the dance tunes, nonsense words, sounds without meaning, and yet everyone strained to hear her soft voice without knowing why. And when, during a waltz, she caught up the trailing end of her gown to give her more freedom as she danced, she seemed to Lady Neville to move like a little sailing boat over a still evening sea.

Lady Neville heard Lady Torrance arguing angrily with the Contessa della Candini. "I don't care if she is Death, she's no older than I am, she can't be!"

"Nonsense," said the Contessa, who could not afford to be generous to any other woman. "She is twenty-eight, thirty, if she is an hour. And that dress, that bridal gown she wears—really!"

"Vile," said the woman who had come to the ball as Captain Compson's freely acknowledged mistress. "Tasteless. But one should know better than to expect taste from Death, I suppose." Lady Torrance looked as if she were going to cry.

"They are jealous of Death," Lady Neville said to herself. "How strange. I am not jealous of her, not in the least. And I do not fear her at all." She was very proud of herself.

Then, as unbiddenly as they had begun to play, the musicians stopped. They began to put away their instruments. In the sudden shrill silence, Death pulled away from Captain Compson and ran to look out of one of the tall windows, pushing the curtains apart with both hands. "Look!" she said, with her back turned to them. "Come and look. The night is almost gone."

The summer sky was still dark, and the eastern horizon was only a shade lighter than the rest of the sky, but the stars had vanished and the trees near the house were gradually becoming distinct. Death pressed her face against the window and said, so softly that the other guests could barely hear her, "I must go now."

"No," Lady Neville said, and was not immediately aware that she had spoken. "You must stay a while longer. The ball was in your honor. Please stay."

Death held out both hands to her, and Lady Neville came and took them in her own. "I've had a wonderful time," she said gently. "You cannot possibly imagine how it feels to be actually invited to such a ball as this, because you have given them and gone to them all your life. One is like another to you, but for me it is different. Do you understand me?" Lady Neville nodded silently. "I will remember this night forever," Death said.

"Stay," Captain Compson said. "Stay just a little longer." He put his hand on Death's shoulder, and she smiled and leaned her cheek against it. "Dear Captain Compson," she said. "My first real gallant. Aren't you tired of me yet?"

"Never," he said. "Please stay."

"Stay," said Lorimond, and he too seemed about to touch her. "Stay. I want to talk to you. I want to look at you. I will dance with you if you stay."

"How many followers I have," Death said in wonder. She stretched one hand toward Lorimond, but he drew back from her and then flushed in shame. "A soldier and a poet. How wonderful it is to be a woman. But why did you not speak to me earlier, both of you? Now it is too late. I must go."

"Please stay," Lady Torrance whispered. She held on to her husband's hand for courage. "We think you are so beautiful, both of us do."

"Gracious Lady Torrance," the girl said kindly. She turned back to the window, touched it lightly, and it flew open. The cool dawn air rushed into the ballroom, fresh with rain but already smelling faintly of the London streets over which it had passed. They heard birdsong and the strange, harsh nickering of Death's horses.

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked. The question was put, not to Lady Neville, nor to Captain Compson, nor to any of her admirers, but to the Contessa della Candini, who stood well back from them all, hugging her flowers to herself and humming a little song of irritation. She did not in the least want Death to stay, but she was afraid that all the other women would think her envious of Death's beauty, and so she said, "Yes. Of course I do."

"Ah," said Death. She was almost whispering. "And you," she said to another woman, "do you want me to stay? Do you want me to be one of your friends?"

"Yes," said the woman, "because you are beautiful and a true lady."

"And you," said Death to a man, "and you," to a woman, "and you," to another man, "do you want me to stay?" And they all answered, "Yes, Lady Death, we do."

"Do you want me, then?" she cried at last to all of them. "Do you want me to live among you and to be one of you, and not to be Death anymore? Do you want me to visit your houses and come to all your parties? Do you want me to ride horses like yours instead of mine, do you want me to wear the kind of dresses you wear, and say the things you would say? Would one of you marry me, and would the rest of you dance at my wedding and bring gifts to my children? Is that what you want?"

"Yes," said Lady Neville. "Stay here, stay with me, stay with us."

Death's voice, without becoming louder, had become clearer and older; too old a voice, thought Lady Neville, for such a young girl. "Be sure," said Death. "Be sure of what you want, be very sure. Do all of you want me to stay? For if one of you says to me, no, go away, then I must leave at once and never return. Be sure. Do you all want me?"

And everyone there cried with one voice, "Yes! Yes, you must stay with us. You are so beautiful that we cannot let you go."

"We are tired," said Captain Compson.

"We are blind," said Lorimond, adding, "especially to poetry."

"We are afraid," said Lord Torrance quietly, and his wife took his arm and said, "Both of us."

"We are dull and stupid," said Lady Neville, "and growing old uselessly. Stay with us, Lady Death."

And then Death smiled sweetly and radiantly and took a step forward, and it was as though she had come down among them from a great height. "Very well," she said. "I will stay with you. I will be Death no more. I will be a woman."

The room was full of a deep sigh, although no one was seen to open his mouth. No one moved, for the golden-haired girl was Death still, and her horses still whinnied for her outside. No one could look at her for long, although she was the most beautiful girl anyone there had ever seen.

"There is a price to pay," she said. "There is always a price. Some one of you must become Death in my place, for there must forever be Death in the world. Will anyone choose? Will anyone here become Death of his own free will? For only thus can I become a human girl."

No one spoke, no one spoke at all. But they backed slowly away from her, like waves slipping back down a beach to the sea when you try to catch them. The Contessa della Candini and her friends would have crept quietly out of the door, but Death smiled at them and they stood where they were. Captain Compson opened his mouth as though he were going to declare himself, but he said nothing. Lady Neville did not move.

"No one," said Death. She touched a flower with her finger, and it seemed to crouch and flex itself like a pleased cat. "No one at all," she said. "Then I must choose, and that is just, for that is the way that I became Death. I never wanted to be Death, and it makes me so happy that you want me to become one of yourselves. I have searched a long time for people who would want me. Now I have only to choose someone to replace me and it is done. I will choose very carefully."

"Oh, we were so foolish," Lady Neville said to herself. "We were so foolish." But she said nothing aloud: she merely clasped her hands and stared at the young girl, thinking vaguely that if she had had a daughter she would have been greatly pleased if she resembled the lady Death.

"The Contessa della Candini," said Death thoughtfully, and that woman gave a little squeak of terror because she could not draw her breath for a scream. But Death laughed and said, "No, that would be silly." She said nothing more, but for a long time after that the Contessa burned with humiliation at not having been chosen to be Death.

"Not Captain Compson," murmured Death, "because he is too kind to become Death, and because it would be too cruel to him. He wants to die so badly." The expression on the Captain's face did not change, but his hands began to tremble.

"Not Lorimond," the girl continued, "because he knows so little about life, and because I like him." The poet flushed, and turned white, and then turned pink again. He made as if to kneel clumsily on one knee, but instead he pulled himself erect and stood as much like Captain Compson as he could.

"Not the Torrances," said Death, "never Lord and Lady Torrance, for both of them care too much about another person to take any pride in being Death." But she hesitated over Lady Torrance for a while, staring at her out of her dark and curious eyes. "I was your age when I became Death," she said at last. "I wonder what it will be like to be your age again.

I have been Death for so long." Lady Torrance shivered and did not speak.

And at last Death said quietly, "Lady Neville."

"I am here," Lady Neville answered.

"I think you are the only one," said Death. "I choose you, Lady Neville."

Again Lady Neville heard every guest sigh softly, and although her back was to them all she knew that they were sighing in relief that neither themselves nor anyone dear to themselves had been chosen. Lady Torrance gave a little cry of protest, but Lady Neville knew that she would have cried out at whatever choice Death made. She heard herself say calmly, "I am honored. But was there no one more worthy than I?"

"Not one," said Death. "There is no one quite so weary of being human, no one who knows better how meaningless it is to be alive. And there is no one else here with the power to treat life"—and she smiled sweetly and cruelly—"the life of your hairdresser's child, for instance, as the meaningless thing it is. Death has a heart, but it is forever an empty heart, and I think, Lady Neville, that your heart is like a dry riverbed, like a seashell. You will be very content as Death, more so than I, for I was very young when I became Death."

She came toward Lady Neville, light and swaying, her deep eyes wide and full of the light of the red morning sun that was beginning to rise. The guests at the ball moved back from her, although she did not look at them, but Lady Neville clenched her hands tightly and watched Death come toward her with her little dancing steps. "We must kiss each other," Death said. "That is the way I became Death." She shook her head delightedly, so that her soft hair swirled about her shoulders. "Quickly, quickly," she said. "Oh, I cannot wait to be human again."

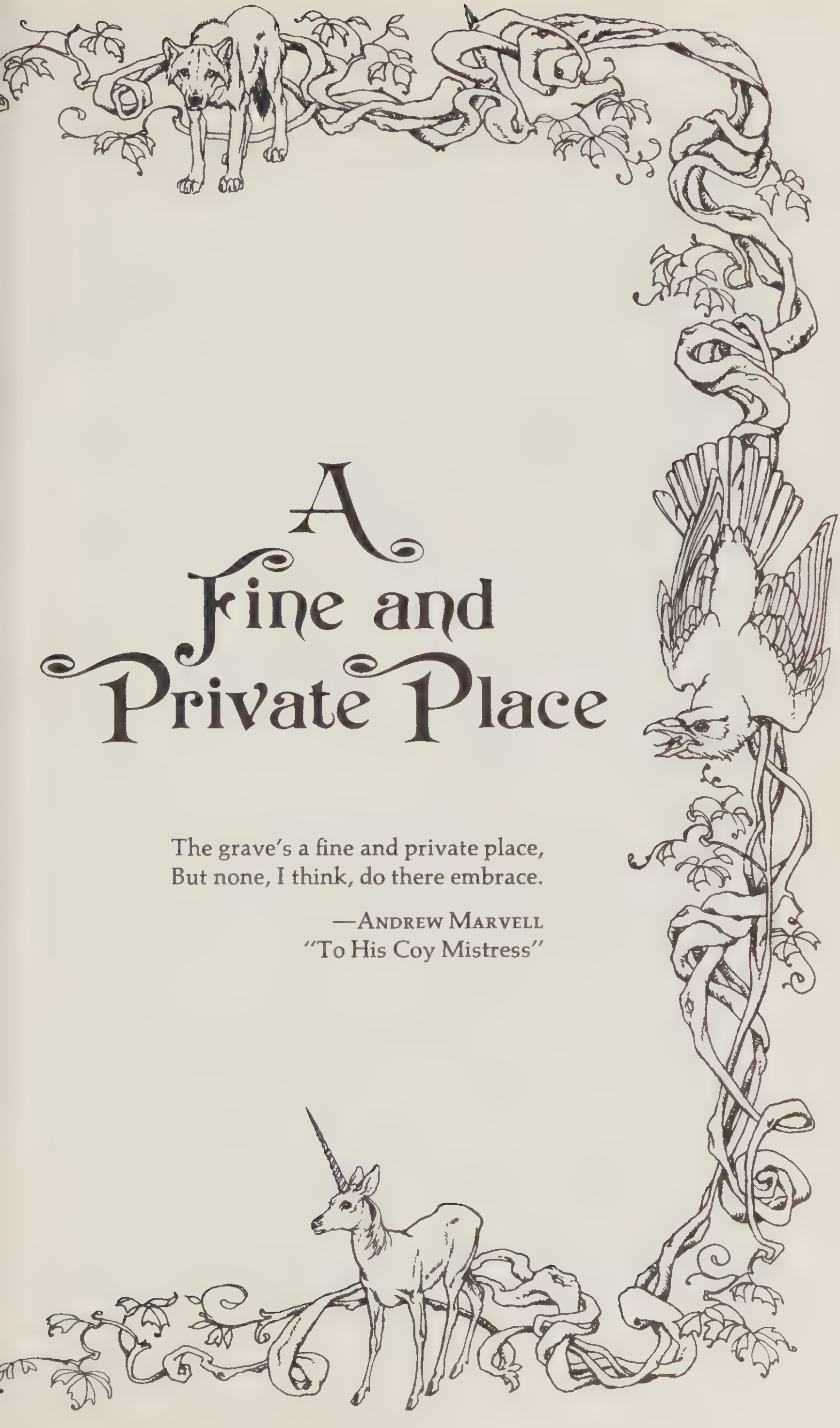
"You may not like it," Lady Neville said. She felt very calm, though she could hear her old heart pounding in her chest and feel it in the tips of her fingers. "You may not like it after a while," she said.

"Perhaps not." Death's smile was very close to her now. "I will not be as beautiful as I am, and perhaps people will not love me as much as they do now. But I will be human for a while, and at last I will die. I have done my penance."

"What penance?" the old woman asked the beautiful girl. "What was it you did? Why did you become Death?"

"I don't remember," said the lady Death. "And you too will forget in time." She was smaller than Lady Neville, and so much younger. In her white dress she might have been the daughter that Lady Neville had never had, who would have been with her always and held her mother's head lightly in the crook of her arm when she felt old and sad. Now she lifted her head to kiss Lady Neville's cheek, and as she did so she whispered in her ear, "You will still be beautiful when I am ugly. Be kind to me then."

Behind Lady Neville the handsome gentlemen and ladies murmured and sighed, fluttering like moths in their evening dress, in their elegant gowns. "I promise," she said, and then she pursed her dry lips to kiss the soft, sweet-smelling cheek of the young lady Death.



A Fine and Private Place

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

—ANDREW MARVELL
"To His Coy Mistress"

I

THE BALONEY weighed the raven down, and the shopkeeper almost caught him as he whisked out the delicatessen door. Frantically he beat his wings to gain altitude, looking like a small black electric fan. An updraft caught him and threw him into the sky. He circled twice, to get his bearings, and began to fly north.

Below, the shopkeeper stood with his hands on his hips, looking up at the diminishing cinder in the sky. Presently he shrugged and went back into his delicatessen. He was not without philosophy, this shopkeeper, and he knew that if a raven comes into your delicatessen and steals a whole baloney it is either an act of God or it isn't, and in either case there isn't very much you can do about it.

The raven flew lazily over New York, letting the early sun warm his feathers. A water truck waddled along Jerome Avenue, leaving the street dark and glittering behind it. A few taxicabs cruised around Fordham like well-fed sharks. Two couples came out of the subway and walked slowly, the girls leaning against the men. The raven flew on.

It had been a hot night, and the raven saw people waking on the roofs of the city. The gray rats that come out just before dawn were all back in their cellars because the cats were out, stepping along the curbs. The morning pigeons had scattered to the rooftops and window ledges when the cats came, which the raven thought was a pity. He could have done with a few less pigeons.

The usual early fog was over Yorkchester, and the raven dropped under it. Yorkchester had been built largely by an insurance company, and it looked like one pink brick building reflected in a hundred mirrors. The houses of Yorkchester were all fourteen stories tall, and they all had stucco sailors playing accordions over the front entrances. The rear entrances all had sailors playing mandolins. The sailors were all left-handed, and they had stucco pom-poms on their hats. There was a shopping center, and there were three movie theaters, and there was a small square park.

There was also a cemetery, and it was over this that the raven swooped. It was a very large cemetery, about half the size of Central Park, and thick with trees. It was laid out carefully, with winding streets named Fairview Avenue, and Central Avenue, and Oakland Avenue, and Larch Street, and Chestnut Street, and Elm Street. One street led to the Italian section of the cemetery, another to the German section, a third to the Polish, and so on, for the Yorkchester Cemetery was nonsectarian but nervous.

The raven had come in the back way, and so he flew down Central Avenue, holding the baloney in his claws. The stretch of more or less simple headstones gradually began to give way to Old Rugged Crosses; the crosses in turn gave way to angels, the angels to weeping angels, and these finally to mausoleums. They reared like icy watchdogs over the family plots and said, "Look! Something of importance has left the world," to one another. They were aggressively Greek, with white marble pillars and domed roofs. They might not have looked Greek to a Greek, but they looked Greek to Yorkchester.

One mausoleum was set away from the others by a short path. It was an old building, not as big as some of the others, nor as white. Its pillars were cracked and chipped at their bases, and the glass was gone from one of the barred grates over the front door. But the two heavy door-rings were held in the mouths of two lions, and if you looked through the window in front you could see the stained-glass angel on the back wall.

The front door itself was open, and on the steps there sat a small man in slippers. He waved at the raven as the bird swept down, and said, "Good morning, good morning," as he landed in front of him. The raven dropped the baloney, and the small man reached forward eagerly and picked it up. "A whole baloney!" he said. "Thank you very much."

The raven was puffing for breath a little and he looked at the small man rather bitterly. "Corn flakes weren't good enough," he said hoarsely. "Bernard Baruch eats corn flakes, but you have to have baloney."

"Did you have trouble bringing it?" asked the small man, whose name was Jonathan Rebeck.

"Damn near ruptured myself." The raven grunted.

"Birds don't get ruptured," said Mr. Rebeck a little uncertainly.

"Hell of an ornithologist *you'd* make."

Mr. Rebeck began to eat the baloney. "Delicious," he said presently. "Very tender. Won't you have some?"

"Don't mind," said the raven. He accepted a piece of baloney from Mr. Rebeck's fingers.

"Is it nice out?" Mr. Rebeck asked after a moment.

"Nice," the raven said. "Blue sky, shining sun. The world stinks with summer."

Mr. Rebeck smiled a little. "Don't you like summer?"

The raven lifted his wings slightly. "Why should I? It's all right."

"I like summer," Mr. Rebeck said. He took a bite of his baloney and said with his mouth full, "It's the only season you can taste when you breathe."

"Jesus," the raven said. "Not so early in the morning. Incidentally, you better get rid of all those old paper bags. I can see them from outside."

"I'll drop them in the wastebasket in the men's room," Mr. Rebeck said.

"No you won't. I'll fly them out. People start wondering, you know. They see paper bags in a cemetery, they don't think the Girl Scouts are having a picnic. Besides, you hang around there too much. They're going to start remembering you."

"I like it," Mr. Rebeck said. "I'm very fond of that lavatory. I wash my clothes there." He locked his hands around his knees. "You know, people say the world is run by materialists and machines. It isn't, though. New York isn't, anyway. A city that would put a men's room in a cemetery is a city of poets." He liked the phrase. "A city of poets," he said again.

"It's for the children," the raven said. "The mothers bring the kids to see the graves of their great-uncles. The mothers cry and put flowers on the grave. The kids gotta go. Sooner or later. So they put in a big can. What else could they do?"

Mr. Rebeck laughed. "You never change," he said to the raven.

"How can I? You've changed, though. Nineteen years ago you'd have been sloppily thankful for a pretzel. Now you want me to bring you steaks. Give me another hunk of baloney."

Mr. Rebeck gave him one. "I still think you could do it. A small steak doesn't weigh so much."

"It does," said the raven, "when there's a cop hanging on one end of it. I damn near didn't get off the ground today. Besides, all the butchers on this last frontier of civilization know me now. I'm going to have to start raiding Washington Heights pretty soon. Another twenty years, if we live that long, I'll have to ferry it across from Jersey."

"You don't have to bring me food, you know," Mr. Rebeck said. He felt a little hurt, and oddly guilty. It was such a small raven, after all. "I can manage myself."

"Balls," said the raven. "You'd panic as soon as you got outside the gate. And the city's changed a lot in nineteen years."

"Pretty much?"

"Very damn much."

"Oh," said Mr. Rebeck. He put the rest of the baloney aside, wrapping it carefully. "Do you mind," he said hesitantly, "bringing me food? I mean, is it inconvenient?" He felt silly asking, but he did want to know.

The raven stared at him out of eyes like frozen gold. "Once a year," he said hoarsely. "Once a year you get worried. You start wondering how come the airborne Gristede's. You ask yourself, What's he getting out of it? You say, 'Nothing for nothing. Nobody does anybody any favors.' "

"That isn't so," Mr. Rebeck said. "That isn't so at all."

"Ha," said the raven. "All right. Your conscience starts to bother you. Your cold cuts don't taste right." He looked straight at Mr. Rebeck. "Of course it's a trouble. Of course it's inconvenient. You're damn right it's out of my way. Feel better? Any other questions?"

"Yes," said Mr. Rebeck. "Why do you do it, then?"

The raven made a dive at a hurrying caterpillar and missed. He spoke slowly, without looking at Mr. Rebeck. "There are people," he said, "who give, and there are people who take. There are people who create, people who destroy, and people who don't do anything and drive the other two kinds crazy. It's born in you, whether you give or take, and that's the way you are. Ravens bring things to people. We're like that. It's our nature. We don't like it. We'd much rather be eagles, or swans, or even one of those moronic robins, but we're ravens and there you are. Ravens don't feel right without somebody to bring things to, and when we do find somebody we realize what a silly business it was in the first place." He made a sound between a chuckle and a cough. "Ravens are pretty neurotic birds. We're closer to people than any other bird, and we're bound to them all our lives, but we don't have to like them. You think we brought Elijah food because we liked him? He was an old man with a dirty beard."

He fell silent, scratching aimlessly in the dust with his beak. Mr. Rebeck said nothing. Presently he reached out a tentative hand to smooth the raven's plumage.

"Don't do that," said the bird.

"I'm sorry."

"It makes me nervous."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Rebeck said again. He stared out over the neat family plots with their mossy headstones. "I hope some more people come soon," he said. "It gets lonesome in the summer."

"You wanted company," the bird said, "you should have joined the Y."

"I do have company, most of the time," Mr. Rebeck said. "But they forget so soon, and so easily. It's best when they've just arrived." He got up and leaned against a pillar. "Sometimes I think I'm dead," he said. The raven made a sputtering sound of derision. "I do. I forget things too. The sun shines in my eyes sometimes and I don't even notice it. Once I sat with an old man, and we tried to remember how pistachio nuts tasted, and neither of us could."

"I'll bring you some," the raven said. "There's a candy store near Tremont that sells them. It's a bookie joint too."

"That would be nice," Mr. Rebeck said. He turned to look at the stained-glass angel.

"They accept me more easily now," he said with his back to the raven. "They used to be dreadfully frightened. Now we sit and talk and play games, and I think, Maybe now, maybe this time, maybe really. Then I ask them, and they say no."

"They'd know," the raven said.

"Yes," Mr. Rebeck said, turning back, "but if life is the only distinction between the living and the dead—I don't think I'm alive. Not really."

"You're alive," the raven said. "You hide behind gravestones, but it follows you. You ran away from it nineteen years ago, and it follows you like a skip-tracer." He cackled softly. "Life must love you very much."

"I don't want to be loved," Mr. Rebeck cried. "It's a burden on me."

"Well, that's your affair," the raven said. "I got my own problems." His black wings beat in a small thunder. "I gotta get moving. Let's have the bags and stuff."

Mr. Rebeck went into the mausoleum and came out a few moments later with five empty paper bags and an empty milk container. The raven took the bags in his claws and waved aside the container. "I'll pick that up later. Carry it now and I'll have to walk home." He sprang into the air and flapped slowly away over Central Avenue.

"Good-by," Mr. Rebeck called after him.

"See you," the raven croaked and disappeared behind a huge elm. Mr. Rebeck stretched himself, sat down again on the steps, and watched the sun climb. He felt a bit disconcerted. Usually, the raven brought him food twice a day, they exchanged some backchat, and that was that. Sometimes they didn't even talk. I don't know that bird at all, he thought, and it's been all these years. I know ghosts better than I know that small bird. He drew his knees up to his chin and thought about that. It was a new thought, and Mr. Rebeck treasured new thoughts. He hadn't had too many lately, and he knew it was his fault. The cemetery wasn't conducive to new thoughts; the environment wasn't right. It was a place for counting over the old, stored thoughts, stroking them lovingly and carefully, as if they were fine glassware, wondering if they could be thought any other way, and knowing deeply and securely that this way was the best. So he examined the new thought closely but gingerly, stood close to it to get the details and then away from it for perspective; he stretched it, thinned it, patted it into different shapes, gradually molding it to fit the contours of his mind.

A rush of wings made him look up. The raven was circling ten or fifteen feet above him, calling to him. "Forget something?" Mr. Rebeck called up to him.

"Saw something on the way out," the bird said. "There's a funeral procession coming in the front gate—not a very big one, but it's coming this way. You better either hide in a hurry or change your pants, either one. They may think you're a reception committee."

"Oh, my goodness!" Mr. Rebeck exclaimed. He sprang to his feet. "Thank you, thank you very much. Can't afford to get careless. Thank you for telling me."

"Don't I always?" the raven said wearily. He flew away again with easy, powerful wing strokes. And Mr. Rebeck hurried inside the mausoleum, closed the door, and lay down on the floor, listening to his heart beat in the sudden darkness.

II

It was a rather small funeral procession, but it had dignity. A priest walked in front, with two young boys at his right and left. The coffin came next, carried by five pallbearers. Four of them were each carrying a corner of the coffin, and the fifth was looking slightly embarrassed. Behind them, dressed in somber and oddly graceful black, came Sandra Morgan, who had been the wife of Michael Morgan. Bringing up the rear came three variously sad people. One of them had roomed with Michael Morgan in college. Another had taught history with him at Ingersoll University. The third had drunk and played cards with him and rather liked him.

Michael would have liked his own funeral if he could have seen it. It was small and quiet, and really not at all pompous, as Michael had feared it might be. "The dead," he had said once, "need nothing from the living, and the living can give nothing to the dead." At twenty-two, it had sounded precocious; at thirty-four, it sounded mature, and this pleased Michael very much. He had liked being mature and reasonable. He disliked ritual and pomposity, routine and false emotion, rhetoric and sweeping gestures. Crowds made him nervous. Pageantry offended him. Essentially a romantic, he had put away the trappings of romance, although he had loved them deeply and never known.

The procession wound its quiet way through Yorkchester Cemetery, and the priest mused upon the transience of the world, and Sandra Morgan wept for her husband and looked hauntingly lovely, and the friends made the little necessary readjustments in their lives, and the boys' feet hurt. And in the coffin, Michael Morgan beat on the lid and howled.

Michael had died rather suddenly and very definitely, and when consciousness came back to him he knew where he was. The coffin swayed and tilted on four shoulders, and his body banged against the narrow walls. He lay quietly at first, because there was always the possibility that he might be dreaming.

But he heard the priest chanting close by and the gravel slipping under the feet of the pallbearers, and a tinkling sound that must have been Sandra weeping, and he knew better.

Either he really was dead, he thought, or he had been pronounced so by mistake. That had happened to other people, he knew, and it was entirely possible—not to say fitting—that it had happened to Michael Morgan. Then a great fear of the choking earth seized him, and he pounded on the coffin lid with his fists and screamed. But no sound came from his lips, and the lid was silent under his hammering.

Frantically he called his wife's name and cursed her when she continued her ivory weeping. The priest intoned his liturgy and looked warningly at the boys when they dragged their feet; the pallbearers shifted the coffin on their shoulders; and Michael Morgan wept silently for his silence.

And then suddenly he was calm. Frenzy spent, he lay quietly in his coffin and knew himself dead.

So there you are, Morgan, he said to himself. Thirty-four years of one thing and another, and here is where it ends. Back to the earth—or back to the sea, he added, because he could never remember where it was that all protoplasm eventually wound up. His consciousness did not startle him too much. He had always been willing to concede the faint possibility of an afterlife, and this, he supposed, was the first stage. Lie back, Morgan, he thought, and take it easy. Sing a spiritual or something. He wondered again if there might not have been some mistake, but he didn't really believe it.

A pallbearer slipped and nearly dropped his end of the coffin, but Michael did not feel the jolt. "I don't *feel* particularly dead," he said to the coffin lid, "but I'm just a layman. My opinion would be valueless in any court in the land. Don't butt in, Morgan. It was a perfectly nice funeral till you started causing trouble." He closed his eyes and lay still, wondering absently about rigor mortis.

The procession stopped suddenly, and the priest's voice became louder and firmer. He was chanting in Latin, and Michael listened appreciatively. He had always detested funerals and avoided them as much as possible. But it's different, he thought, when it's your own funeral. You feel it's one of those occasions that shouldn't be missed.

He knew no Latin, but he clung to the falling words of the chant, knowing them to be the last human words he would ever hear. "Ashes to ashes," I suppose it means, he thought, "and dust to dust." That's all you are now, Morgan—a cup of dust scattered to the wolves of night. He considered the phrase and rejected it reluctantly. What, after all, would wolves want with dust?

The first clods fell on the coffin lid, sounding for all the world like a knock on the door. Michael laughed inside his head. Come in, he thought, come right in. The house is in a bit of a mess right now, but I'm always glad of company. Walk right in, friend. This is Open House.

Sandra was crying loudly and quite thoroughly now, but her sobs were beginning to sound like yawns. Poor Sandy, Michael thought. They probably got you up early for this, too. I'm sorry, lass. Just a minute or so—then you can go home and go back to sleep.

The earth-sounds became fainter. Presently they stopped.

Well, here we are, said Michael Morgan to himself. He realized the absurdity of the words and defiantly thought them again. Here we are. Here we are. Here we are. Here we all are. Here we go around the prickly pear. Prickly pear. Here we are, prickly pear. Over here. He stopped that finally, and thought about Heaven and Hell and Sandra.

He had never believed in either of the first two during his life, and he saw no reason to start now. I'm in this worm Automat for the duration, he thought, and in a few minutes I will turn over and draw eternity up around my neck and go to sleep. If he was wrong, one of two Old Gentlemen would be around to see him shortly, and a number of things might finally become clear. In the meantime, he decided to think about Sandra.

He had loved Sandra. Thinking about it in a detached fashion, he dared anybody not to love Sandra. She was all the world's loved objects in one, and she showed them off slowly and lazily, like a revolving dish of diamonds in a jeweler's window. Besides, she looked needing, and she had a sad mouth.

They had met at the small reception that had been given for him when he joined the Ingersoll faculty. She had come with her uncle, who taught geology. Their glances had crossed, and he had put down his drink and gone to her. Within fifteen minutes he had been quoting Rimbaud for her, and Dowson, and Swinburne, and his own secret songs. And she had heard and understood: Michael wanted to go to bed with her. So they were mature and civilized, and she took him into her huge, warm bed, in which she managed to look quite affectingly lost.

Michael loved that lost quality of hers. It made him feel necessary and useful. He discovered a strong protective streak in himself, and was in turn irritated by it, amused by it, and vastly delighted with it. He was all the more captured by her moments of cool brilliance and lazy wit; it made her three-dimensional. And Michael had ridden in search of the third dimension for a long time.

So they were married, and Michael received what the president called "a bit of a raise." It was just that, but it enabled Michael and Sandra Morgan to move into an apartment in Yorkchester and Sandra to quit her art-gallery job. They had been married for four years, and much of it had been happy.

And now he was dead, Michael thought. Dead and buried, humus for the hungry earth. And he would never see Sandra again. The thought hurt him, even through the numbness that had stroked him with its witch-fingers. His body was nothing to him now, but a deal of his soul seemed to have been left where Sandra was, and dead, he felt naked and somehow incomplete.

He prayed for sleep, and when it did not come he invented ways of passing the time. He broke down his life into periods marked Youth, Harvard, Europe, Korea, Ingersoll, and Sandra, and examined them carefully and objectively. First he decided that his life had not been wasted, and shortly after, he decided that it had. He thought of all the tiny factors that had gone to make up the mortal existence of Michael Morgan, enumerated them, weighed them, and decided that they had individual meaning but no collective significance; and then he thought it might be the other way round. With death, he had discovered, there came the power of disinterested scrutiny of the way he had come. Along with it, however, came a peculiar lack of interest in much of what had once been a very important world. Only Sandra seemed real now—Sandra and perhaps the good New York springs and finding the one student in his class who understood the lonely steel mill that was Bismarck and the ice emperor Bonaparte.

After that he tried to recall all the great music he had ever heard, and quickly discovered that his education had not been nearly so complete, his interest so great, and his memory so retentive as he had hoped. Only the Chopin Preludes that he had learned as a boy stayed with him, along with some Rimsky-Korsakov, a few passages from the Ninth, and a plaintive, wandering strain he decided was Weill. The rest was gone, or he was gone from it, and he was sorry because it would have been nice to have music.

You have to be very deep to be dead, he thought, and I'm not. He began to have some concept of forever, and his mind shivered as his body had when he had wakened in the cold nights and thrust his hands between his thighs to keep warm. It will be a long night, he thought.

Suddenly he remembered an early morning with Sandra before they had been married. They had sat at her little kitchen table, eating bread-and-jelly sandwiches. She had gone to the icebox for a bottle of milk, and he had sat and watched her move. Her feet made a very small, among-friends sound on the linoleum. As he thought of it now, the pain seemed to snap him like an icicle. He cried out, hearing it as a great animal yawp of terror—and then he was standing beside his own grave, calling, "Sandy! Sandy!"

She did not come, and he knew she would not, and still he called, thinking, I will close my eyes and count a hundred, and when I look up she will be there—the way he did when he was waiting for a bus. But he could not close his eyes, and the numbers rattled in his head like dice. Finally he forced himself to stop calling, and after a while he sat down in the grass.

It took him a while to realize that he had left his grave, and when he did it didn't seem very important. I'm out, he said to himself, and I can talk again and move around, and I'm no better off than I was. Alive, he could at least have kept up the pretense of having somewhere important to go; but now apparently he could just sit by the roadside for the next few million years, if he felt like it. And he did feel like it. He wanted only to sit in the grass and watch the ants running and not think about anything. I want my mind to be white and clean and unmarked, he thought, like my bones. That was the answer to everything, and he hadn't seen it. "You can have my skull," he said politely to the ants. "I won't be needing it." But they kept running in the grass, and he became angry with them. "All right," he said. "And the hell with you too." And he got up and went over to look at his grave.

There was no stone yet, only a small metal marker. It said: "Michael Morgan, March 7, 1924–June 10, 1958," and he felt very pleased with its conciseness. Like a *Times* headline, he thought, and he looked at it for a long time.

My body is there, he thought. All my chicken dinners and head-scratching and sneezing and fornication and hot baths and sunburns and beer and shaving—all buried and forgotten. All the little pettinesses washed away. I feel clean and light and pure. He thought about book-hunting on Fourth Avenue and decided that he felt like a smashed light bulb.

"Good-by," he said to his body and walked away down the paved road. He wanted to whistle and felt cheated when he found he could not.

Michael Morgan walked through the graveyard and his feet made no sound. The sun shone hot on him and he did not feel it, nor did he feel the tiny winds that chuckled between the stones. He saw a ring of Greek pillars that held up nothing, and near it a concrete birdbath. He saw fountains and flowers and a wheelbarrow half full of earth. Once a car rushed past him as he walked along the side of the road, but nobody in it looked at him.

He saw family plots, with the little headstones bunched together like frightened cattle; and he saw a great mausoleum four stories high, with an angel on marble guard. He saw a clump of cherry trees, and their boughs were thick and swollen with the red fruit. Spaced at regular intervals, twenty-foot spires pointed the way to Heaven, for the benefit, Michael decided, of lost souls and tourists.

He felt as if he were walking in a slightly leaky vacuum. He could see the sun, and he assumed it was still burning, but he personally felt neither hot nor cold. He knew there was a breeze, for he saw leaves wander across his path, but he felt no air on his skin. Faintly but clearly, he heard birds singing and water flowing, but the sounds meant nothing to him, and he never even thought of trying to pick a cherry. It wasn't that he didn't give a damn—Michael had been trying very hard not to give a damn for most of his life—but that giving or not giving damns never entered the question. "I feel mediocre," he experimented. "Lukewarm"—but the words were meaningless.

He walked for a long time. The black paved road became dirt, and then gravel, and then pavement again, and other roads ran away from it; sometimes it was broad, and other times as narrow as the cold bed of Barbara Allen; but it did not end, and Michael walked on and never grew tired.

Maybe there is no end, he thought. Maybe I just go on walking—and felt nothing but a whispery amusement at the prospect.

Then he came over a low hill and saw the mausoleum and the small man sitting in front of it. The man had his knees drawn up and his chin on his folded forearms and was looking at nothing.

Sensation seemed to return to Michael: curiosity, interest, a little fear, pleasure, and a spoonful of hope came slowly back, saying to one another, What is this? How is this? Is the house not empty yet? And Michael Morgan called gladly, "Hello!"

The small man blinked, looked around, and smiled at Michael. "Hello," he called back. "Come on down."

Michael came slowly down the hill, and the man got up to meet him. He looked to be in his early fifties, for his shoulders were a little rounded and his hair was gray-white. But the smile he gave Michael was warm and youthful, and his eyes were the color of the earth. "How do you do?" he asked. "My name is Jonathan Rebeck."

"Michael Morgan," said Michael, and suddenly he was so happy to see this small man, and so happy to realize he was happy, that he grabbed for Mr. Rebeck's brown hand—and watched in dull horror as it went completely through his own.

Then he remembered, and for the first time he saw life as the dead see it. He backed off from Mr. Rebeck, and would have turned to run if the small man's eyes had not been full of brown sadness. So he sat down on the steps that led up to the mausoleum and tried to cry; but he didn't know where to begin.

"All right," he said finally, "I'm dead."

"I know," said Mr. Rebeck gently. He paused and then added, "I saw your funeral procession."

"Did you?" Michael looked up. "How did it look from the outside?"

"Very nice," said Mr. Rebeck. "Very quiet and tasteful."

"That's good," Michael said. "Man comes into the world with a maximum of fuss, as it is. Let him—"

Mr. Rebeck began to laugh. "A maximum of fuss." He chuckled softly. "Very true. Very funny and very true."

"Could I finish?" Michael asked coldly.

"What? Oh, certainly. I'm awfully sorry. I thought you were through."

"Let him leave with the minimum," Michael finished, but he trailed off disgustedly at the end. Mr. Rebeck laughed politely, and Michael scowled at him. In the middle of the scowl he began to laugh, hiccuping, machine-gun laughs, and when he stopped he knuckled at his eyes. But there were no tears to wipe away, and he looked soberly at Mr. Rebeck.

"I don't feel dead," he said slowly. "Would I still be making those lousy epigrams if I were dead? I feel as alive as anyone. As alive as you."

"I'm not a very good standard," Mr. Rebeck said softly.

"I don't feel dead," Michael said firmly. "I feel my body on me like an anchor." The simile pleased him. "An anchor. A nice, comforting anchor holding me to earth. If I'm dead, how come I don't just go billowing off into the beyond like a sheet blown off a clothesline?" He felt a vague regret that Mooney, head of the Classics Department, couldn't hear him now. They had stayed up late together, Mooney and he.

"I know a good metaphor," Mr. Rebeck said thoughtfully. "Don't people who have had their arms or legs amputated always say they can feel them still? They say they itch at night."

Michael was silent for a long time.

"I know a better one," he said finally. "It's an old superstition. Some people believe that if you kill a snake in the daytime its tail won't stop wiggling till sundown." He looked at Mr. Rebeck. "All right. I'm dead. How long till sundown?"

"A while yet," Mr. Rebeck said. He sat down beside Michael. "You see, Michael, nobody dies just like that. The body dies quickly, but the soul hangs on to life as long as it can because living is all it knows."

"Soul?" Michael felt faintly worried. "I do have a soul, then?"

"I don't know if that's the right word. Memory might be better. Living is a big thing, and it's pretty hard to forget. To the dead, everything connected with life becomes important—striking a match, clipping your toenails. Not only does your own life pass before you; everybody else's does. You find yourself becoming greedy of people; whenever they come to visit here you watch every movement they make, trying to remember the way you used to do that. And when they leave you follow them all the way to the entrance, and you stop there because you can't go any further." He paused. "They had it all backwards, you see, those old ghost stories about the dead haunting the living. It's not that way at all."

Michael smiled faintly. "You know more about death than I do."

"I've lived here a long time," Mr. Rebeck said. "Death is something that has to be learned. Just like life, only you don't have to learn so fast because you've got more time."

"Will it be like this—forever? I mean, so far it's just like being alive, only less rushed."

Mr. Rebeck didn't laugh. "It's different," he said, "but I can't really tell you how. I could if I were dead, I think—only then I wouldn't want to." He saw Michael blink puzzledly and went on. "This much I can tell you: you forget things. A week from now you'll have forgotten a few things—what music you liked, what games you used to play, little things. In two weeks a few bigger things may go—where you worked, where you studied—in three weeks you won't remember that you ever loved or hated anybody. In four weeks—I can't exactly put it into words. You just forget things."

"I forget everything?" Mr. Rebeck could barely hear Michael's voice. He nodded.

"Everything? Talking—thinking?"

"They become unnecessary," Mr. Rebeck said, "like breathing. You don't really forget them, you just don't have any use for them or any need. They atrophy, like the appendix. You aren't really talking right now. How can you? You haven't got a larynx, you haven't got vocal chords, you haven't got a diaphragm. But you're so used to talking and you want to talk so badly that I hear you as clearly as if you could make sounds. Nothing's going to stop you from talking as long as you want to. You just won't want to after a while."

"It is Hell, then," Michael said slowly. "It really is Hell."

"Funny you should say that," Mr. Rebeck said. "I always thought of it as a little like being an angel. You can't be touched any more, or jarred, or hurt. All the little hypocrisies that hold life together drop away from you. You become a sort of closed circle with no end and no beginning. I think it's the purest state of existence."

"Like an amoeba," Michael said. "They don't get traumas either."

"Not like an amoeba. I'll show you. Look up, Michael. Look at the sun."

Michael raised his eyes and saw the sun. It was red and swollen in the late afternoon, and its heat had become vengeful and vindictive. Mr. Rebeck blinked rapidly as he looked at it and turned his head quickly away. But Michael stared hard at it and saw only a shriveled orange hanging in a crumpled tree. He felt a great pity in him, and a corner-of-the-mouth scorn.

"You see?" Mr. Rebeck asked when Michael finally turned undazzled eyes on him.

"God," said Michael.

"That may be," said Mr. Rebeck. "If I had looked at the sun that long I'd be blind now. You can look at it all day. You can watch it move, if you care to. Nobody can blind you now, Michael. You will see more clearly than you ever saw in life. Nobody can lie to you now, because three-fourths of a lie is wanting to believe it, and believing makes no difference to you any more. I envy you a great deal, Michael."

He sighed and juggled two small pebbles in the palm of his hand. "Whenever I get to thinking I'm dead too," he said softly, "I look at the sun."

Michael wanted to look at the sun again, but he looked at Mr. Rebeck instead and said, "Who are you?"

"I live here," Mr. Rebeck said.

"Why? What do you do?" A thought— "Are you the caretaker?"

"In a way." Mr. Rebeck got up and went inside the mausoleum. He came out a moment later, holding half a baloney and a small container of milk. "Supper," he explained, "or a very late lunch. An old friend of mine brought it." He leaned against a cracked pillar and smiled at Michael, who had not moved.

"Death is like life in a lot of ways," he said thoughtfully. "The power to see clearly doesn't always change people. The wise in life sometimes become wiser in death. The petty in life remain petty. The dead change their addresses, you see, not their souls.

"I've always thought cemeteries were like cities. There are streets, avenues—you've seen them, I think, Michael. There are blocks, too, and house numbers, slums and ghettos, middle-class sections and small palaces. They give visitors cards at the entrance, you know, with their relatives' streets and house numbers. It's the only way they can find them. That's like a city, too.

"A dark city, Michael, and a crowded one. And it has most of the qualities of the other cities: companionship, coldness, argument. There is no love, of course, no love at all, but there isn't so much of that floating around outside either.

"There is loneliness, though. The dead are very lonely for a while, very bewildered, very frightened. The gap that separates them from the living is as wide as the gap that separates the living from each other; wider, I think. They wander as helplessly through the dark city as they did through the cities of stone, and finally they find a quiet bed and try to sleep.

"I like to help them. I like to be here when they come, to calm them and ease their spirits. Someone to talk to, you might say. People have gone mad looking for someone to talk to. We talk, or we sit and play chess—I hope you play—or I read to them. Very little things, Michael, and only for a little while. Soon they drift away, and where they go I cannot follow. They don't need me then; they don't need anyone, and this pleases me because most of them spent their lives trying not to need.

"So I keep them company for a while, these friends of mine. I sometimes tell them that I am the mayor of the dark city, because the word at least is familiar to them, but I think of it more in the nature of being a night light, a lantern down a dark street."

"Charon," Michael said. "Charon and coins on the tongues of the dead."

Mr. Rebeck smiled. "I used to think so," he said. "But Charon was a god, or a demi-god. I'm a man." He chuckled softly. "I used to be a druggist."

"I was a teacher," Michael said. "A history teacher. I liked it very much." He thought of something and asked, a little awkwardly, "Can you see me? I mean, am I visible?"

"I see you," Mr. Rebeck said. "You look like a man, but you cast no shadow and I can see the sun behind you."

"A kind of tracing of a man," Michael said bitterly.

"It doesn't matter," Mr. Rebeck said. "In three weeks or a month you won't even need to take the human form any more."

"I won't remember it, you mean."

"You won't want to remember it."

"I will!" Michael cried out fiercely.

Mr. Rebeck spoke slowly. "I make you the same promise I make everyone, Michael. As long as you cling to being alive, as long as you care to be a man, I'll be here. We'll be two men together in this place. I'll like it, because I get lonesome here and I like company; and you'll like it too, until it becomes a game, a pointless ritual. Then you'll leave."

"I'll stay," Michael said quietly. "I may not be a man, but I'll look as much like one as possible."

Mr. Rebeck spread his hand and shrugged slightly. "I said it wasn't so different from life." He hesitated and then asked, "Tell me, Michael, how did you die?"

The question startled Michael. "I beg your pardon?"

"You look very young," Mr. Rebeck said. "I was wondering."

Michael grinned widely at him. "How about premature old age?"

Mr. Rebeck said nothing.

"I have a wife," Michael said. "I mean, I had a wife."

"I saw her," Mr. Rebeck said. "A beautiful woman."

"Lovely," said Michael. He was silent.

"Well?"

"Well what? My lovely wife killed me. Poisoned me, like salting the soup."

He saw the shock on Mr. Rebeck's face and enjoyed it. He felt very human. He smiled at Mr. Rebeck again.

"I would like to play chess," he said, "before sundown."

III

"We could go for another walk," Mr. Rebeck said.

"I don't want to go for another walk. We've walked all the grass off this place. Where we walk the bare earth follows. Like locusts."

"But you like it. You said you did."

Michael thought hard about scowling and was pleased when he remembered the feeling. "I do like it. But I don't like watching you get tired."

Mr. Rebeck started to say something, but Michael cut him off. "Because I can't. I can't get tired, and watching you breathe as if you were drinking the air bothers me. So let's not walk anywhere."

"All right," Mr. Rebeck said mildly. "We could play some chess, if you like."

"I don't want to play chess." Michael remembered petulance. "You have to make the moves for me. How do you think that makes me feel?"

Mr. Rebeck gazed at him pityingly. "Michael, Michael, you're making this so hard."

"Damn right," Michael said. "I don't give up easily." He grinned at Mr. Rebeck. "If I can't drink vodka and tomato juice any more I'm not drinking anybody's nepenthe. No chess. I don't like chess, anyway."

"I could read to you."

"Read what?" Michael asked suspiciously. "I didn't know you had books."

"The raven steals a couple for me down on Fourth Avenue every now and then," Mr. Rebeck said. "I've got some Swinburne."

Michael tried very hard to remember if he had liked Swinburne, and felt something only a doorstep away from terror when the name made no sound in his head. "Swinburne," he said aloud. He knew Mr. Rebeck was looking at him. My God, he thought, is it all going, then? Frantically he grabbed for the first familiar thing at hand, which happened to be his office number at the college; 1316, he thought, trying to curl up into the number, 1316, 1316, 1316. When it suddenly became 1613, he said quickly, "Swinburne. Yes, I know Swinburne. Didn't he once do a very long poem on the Circe theme?"

It was an old trick, one he remembered from every discussion and bull session he had ever taken part in: If you don't know, make it up. Nobody ever admitted he didn't know a quotation, or a book, or an essay on something. The rule also had a corollary: If you're not sure, it's Marlowe.

He rationalized it, as he always had. He might very well have, he said to himself. How would I know, now?

"Circe?" Mr. Rebeck frowned. "I never read it. But that doesn't mean anything," he added, smiling shyly. "There's a great deal I haven't read."

"I'm not sure it was Swinburne," Michael said. "It might have been somebody else."

"The one I was thinking of was 'The Garden of Proserpine.' You know." He quoted the lines, a little haltingly, but with an eager savoring of the words.

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never—

"I remember," Michael said abruptly. "I don't like it."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Rebeck said. "I thought you might."

"Pat," Michael said. "Very pat. Anyway, Swinburne wrote it while he was alive." He looked up and saw the sun walking slowly up the sky like a tired old man. It interested him, and he stared hard at it. While he looked, Swinburne passed quietly out of his mind forever, unloved and unhated.

"Let's play chess," he said.

"I thought you didn't like chess."

God damn you, Michael thought. He spoke with exaggerated clarity of diction. "I like chess. I am very fond of chess. I'm crazy about chess. Let's play some chess."

Mr. Rebeck laughed and got up. "All right," he said and started for the mausoleum door.

"We can use a pebble for the black rook," Michael called after him.

Mr. Rebeck was digging absently in his hip pocket. He stopped and smiled at Michael a little ruefully.

"For nineteen years," he said, "every time I come back here I reach for the key to let myself in. The lock's broken, you know, but I always expect to find myself locked out."

He pushed the door open and went into the mausoleum. Michael sat down with his back to one of the white pillars; rather, he imagined himself sitting down and, for all practical purposes, he was. He had felt himself losing touch with the physical over these last three days, and it frightened him. Whenever he wanted to walk or smile or wink he had to remember very sharply what walking or smiling or winking was like. Otherwise he remained still, completely out of contact with his body-memories, a raindrop of consciousness hanging in the air. That had happened two days ago, and Michael remembered it.

His memory was still good, and his imagination clear. He felt human and bored, and the very boredom relieved him because it was such a human emotion.

Mr. Rebeck came out of the mausoleum, carrying a chessboard backed with torn green oilcloth. He sat down beside Michael and began to drizzle chess pieces. Three fell out of his shirt pocket, another five from his right pants pocket, and so on until the set was complete, with the exception of the black rook.

None of the pieces were from the same set. Most were made from various yellowing woods, a few were red plastic, and two, a black bishop and a white rook, were carved from a sullenly beautiful mahogany. Their bases were weighted and felted, and where the other pieces wobbled, staggered, and sprawled all over the chessboard, these two stood facing each other from behind opposing lines; and when the wind or Mr. Rebeck's knee scattered the other pieces, the bishop and the rook nodded gravely to each other.

Michael liked looking at the chess pieces. They made him laugh without the rubber-band sound that had been creeping into his laughter over the last three days.

"Motley bunch," he said to Mr. Rebeck, "aren't they?"

"The raven stole them piece by piece," Mr. Rebeck said, "and it took him quite a while because I made him steal them from department stores. He wanted to get them from the old men in the park, but I feel better this way. The black rook was beautiful too, but I lost it and I don't know where it is. Probably still around here somewhere." He held out his two clenched hands to Michael. "Want black or white?"

"White," said Michael, pointing at Mr. Rebeck's right hand. Mr. Rebeck opened the hand and a black pawn rolled out. He began to set up the pieces, humming softly as he did so.

"Where did the raven pick up the chessboard?" Michael asked suddenly.

Mr. Rebeck looked up. "I don't know. He staggered in with it one morning, and when I asked him where he got it he just said he'd been a good boy." He finished setting the pieces in place. "It worries me sometimes. I try not to think about it."

He began the game by moving his king's pawn two squares forward. "I'm very orthodox," he said. He had said this twice during the eight games they had played previously, but Michael did not remember it.

"Make mine the same," Michael said. "I'm not proud." Mr. Rebeck leaned forward and duplicated his own move on Michael's side of the board. He considered his own pieces at some length and finally jumped his knight two squares in front of his king's bishop. Michael made the same move with his queen's knight, and they settled down to the game.

They played quietly. Mr. Rebeck swayed back and forth over the board, moving for both of them, his breathing becoming harsher as the game went on. Michael burrowed into the luxury of wrapping his whole mind around one subject to the exclusion of all others. On the ninth move there was a quick flurry of pawn-exchanging, and again on the fifteenth, when one of Michael's knights and both of his bishops swirled angrily around a pawn of Mr. Rebeck's and left it untouched. Two moves later Michael vengefully picked off one of Mr. Rebeck's knights; after that the game moved slowly and warily.

Suddenly Mr. Rebeck's whole body jerked erect. At first Michael thought of a puppet with all its strings drawn tight; then he rejected the inanimate image and thought of a small wild animal. Mr. Rebeck even seemed to be sniffing the air.

"What is it?" Michael asked.

"There's a woman over there," Mr. Rebeck said tightly.

Sandra's footsteps pattered on the floor of Michael's skull again. "Where?"

"Behind that clump of trees—near the very big mausoleum. She hasn't seen us. That gives us time."

He began to gather up the chess pieces, putting them hurriedly back in his pockets.

"Hey!" Michael said. "Wait a minute."

Mr. Rebeck stopped trying to fit a king into an already overloaded shirt pocket. "What?"

"Just wait, that's all. What are you so afraid of company for? I think it would be nice."

"Michael," said Mr. Rebeck, "for God's sake."

"Never mind that. Why the hell do we have to hide when somebody comes along? Do you do that all the time?"

"Most of the time. Come *on*, Michael."

"What sort of a life is that?"

"Mine," Mr. Rebeck snapped with a kind of driven fierceness, "and I manage. If just one person gets suspicious and reports me to the gatekeeper, they'll throw me out of here. And I can't go outside, Michael. Not ever."

He faced Michael across the chessboard, breathing quickly and hoarsely. Michael was about to say something, or thought he was, when Mr. Rebeck gasped shortly and whispered, "Now you've done it." The woman had mounted the slope of the low hill and stood looking down at them.

"Good," Michael said. "I concede the game. You were winning, anyway." Looking straight at the woman, he called, "Hello. Good morning."

The woman was silent and straight upon the hill.

"Good morning," Michael called again.

"She can't hear you," Mr. Rebeck said.

"She must be deaf, then. I shouted loud enough."

"Not loud enough," Mr. Rebeck said without looking at him.

"You hear me." Michael spoke very softly.

"I'm different."

"Can she see me?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

"She might be able to see me?"

"Maybe. I doubt it, Michael."

"Call her, then."

Mr. Rebeck remained silent.

"Call her," Michael said. "Call her. Please call her."

"All right," Mr. Rebeck said. He turned to look up the hill at the woman and called, "Hello." His voice cracked a little.

"Hello," the woman called. Her voice was high and clear.

She began to descend the hill, placing her feet firmly and carefully.

Mr. Rebeck turned to Michael. "Do you see? Do you believe now?"

"No," Michael said. "Not yet."

Mr. Rebeck's voice was pitched low to keep his words from the approaching woman, but the words hissed out of his mouth like steam. "She can't see you and she can't hear you. Believe me, I know. The living and the dead don't talk together."

"I want to talk to her," Michael said. "I want to hear her voice. I want to talk to somebody alive."

One quick look Mr. Rebeck gave him; then he turned to face the woman, who had now come to the edge of the plot of grass that surrounded the mausoleum. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," the woman said. She was dressed in black, but without a veil. In her late forties, Michael thought. Then he made it the early forties. He had always been a bad judge of women's ages, and the black dress might add a few years.

The most arresting feature of her face was her mouth. It was wide and full-lipped, and there were little soft lines around the corners. When she spoke, the whole mouth became alive, jumping and twitching and gesturing like a dancer's body; occasionally curling back and down to reveal small white teeth.

"A lovely day," said Mr. Rebeck.

"Beautiful," the woman answered. "It should stay like this, is all I ask."

"Oh, it will," Mr. Rebeck said. He fancied he detected curiosity in the dark eyes, and added, "It was such a lovely day I couldn't stay indoors."

"I know," the woman said. "I was up in my house this morning and I said to myself, Gertrude, such a day you should share with somebody. Go and see Morris. So I came right down, Morris shouldn't think nobody remembered him on such a day. Morris is my husband," she explained, seeing Mr. Rebeck frown slightly. "Morris Klapper." She pointed back up the hill toward a great marble building that shone in the sun. "You know, Morris in the big house."

Mr. Rebeck nodded. "I know the name. I've passed the building. It's very impressive."

"All marble," Mrs. Klapper said, "even inside. Morris liked marble." Had she been crying? Mr. Rebeck wondered. He could not tell.

"It's a very beautiful building," he said. He pointed to the Wilder mausoleum. "This is a family plot. They were friends of mine."

He watched Mrs. Klapper inspect the building. For the first time in nineteen years he felt a little ashamed of it. They should have at least replaced the glass in the grating; and he himself could have polished the lions' heads. But the angel was still in good condition. She must see the angel.

"Excuse my saying so," Mrs. Klapper said finally, "but they don't keep it up so good."

"There aren't any caretakers any more," Mr. Rebeck said. "The family died out."

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Klapper said. "Believe me, I'm sorry. I know what that's like." She sniffed, a full-sinused, healthy sniff. "A year and two months now Morris is dead, and I still keep leaning over to wake him up in the morning."

"Some things last a long time," Michael said. He spoke loudly and clearly, but he did not shout. Not until Mrs. Klepper turned away from him. Then he yelled the words, wishing that he could feel them clawing their way out of his throat.

"Be quiet, Michael," said Mr. Rebeck hoarsely.

Mrs. Klapper came a few steps closer. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Mr. Rebeck said. "I just said that you don't forget some things."

"Sure," said Mrs. Klapper. "Some things you remember. Like a husband, or an operation. You know, you have your appendix out and they put it in a little glass bottle and show it to you, and after that you can't stand to look at spaghetti." She took a few more small steps in on the grass. "Like you."

Mr. Rebeck blinked. "What about me?"

"You remind me of Morris," Mrs. Klapper said. "I mean, you don't look like him or anything. When I came down here and saw you playing that"—she pointed to the chessboard lying on the grass—"I thought to myself, My God! There's Morris!" She was silent for a moment. "You were playing by yourself?"

"He was playing me," said Michael, "and getting hell beaten out of him." Which was untrue, but it didn't seem to matter.

"I was trying to solve some chess problems," Mr. Rebeck said. He took the look in her eyes for one of disbelief. "I know this seems like a silly place to play chess, but it's quiet and you can concentrate more."

"You and Morris," Mrs. Klapper said. She sniffed again. "You and Morris. Morris used to do that all the time, take his chessboard and go off in a corner by himself, and if you say, 'Morris, it's time for dinner right away'—'*Sha, sha,* I have to figure this problem.' 'Morris, the meat's getting cold'—'*Sha, sha*. I'll be there in a minute.' 'Morris, you want maybe a sandwich?'—'*Sha, sha*. I'm not hungry.' " She sighed. "A crazy. But go forget him."

"I know," Mr. Rebeck said.

Michael chuckled. "How?"

"Believe me," Mrs. Klapper said, "he'll know I don't forget." She looked around. "Is there a place you could sit down? My feet are coming off."

"I've only the steps to offer," Mr. Rebeck said. "They're pretty clean."

Mrs. Klapper looked at them. She shrugged. "Clean, unclean," she said, "here comes Klapper." She plumped easily down on the top step and let out a gusty sigh. "*Vey*," she said, "my feet were absolutely coming off." She smiled warmly at Mr. Rebeck.

"I'm a little tired myself," Mr. Rebeck said. He felt himself blushing. "I live a long way from here."

"I'll be damned," said Michael, squatting next to Mrs. Klapper. "You've got blood left."

Mrs. Klapper patted the space at her side. "So sit. What are you, a boy athlete? At your age, a man should sit down anywhere he feels like it."

"Thank you," Mr. Rebeck said. He sat gingerly next to her, suddenly wondering, At my age? Do I look that old? How old does she think I am? He wanted to stand up again, but he felt himself committed.

They sat silently for a while. Mrs. Klapper had slipped off one of her shoes and was sighing softly and contentedly. Mr. Rebeck wanted to say something to her, but he couldn't think of a thing. It made him angry with himself.

Suddenly a scream like Hell's star tenor on a good day rang and burst inside his head. He leaped to his feet with a cry of real physical pain and looked wildly around him for the scream's source.

Mrs. Klepper remained seated, but she slipped her shoe back on and looked at him in some alarm. "You feel all right?" she asked.

"I h-heard something," Mr. Rebeck stammered, "a scream. . . ."

"Funny." Mrs. Klapper stood up too. "I didn't hear a thing."

"I heard a scream," Mr. Rebeck said, and then he saw Michael, sitting cross-legged, shuddering with silent laughter. "Michael!" he said before he thought.

Michael opened his mouth and pointed down blackness into his throat. "Testing," he said. "Just testing. I wanted to see if you were on the job."

"Who?" Mrs. Klapper's brows drew together, as if for protection.

Mr. Rebeck wiped his forehead. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I'm awfully sorry. I thought I heard someone."

He expected Mrs. Klapper to break into either laughter or full retreat. Instead, he saw her face relax into understanding. "Your friend, huh?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Rebeck, thinking in cold-bellied terror, *Does she see Michael?*

"Your friend," said Mrs. Klapper, pointing at the mausoleum. "The one buried in there."

"Oh," said Mr. Rebeck. He thought quickly. "Yes. Michael Wilder. Very old friend. It hit me very hard when he died." Mrs. Klapper was nodding steadily. He went on, "Every now and then I'm sure I hear him calling me."

"Nice," said Michael. "Very nice." After a moment he added, "I'm sorry I did that."

"I guess it sounds a little crazy," Mr. Rebeck added.

Mrs. Klapper sat down on the steps again. "Listen," she said firmly, "half the world is crazy that way." She paused. "Me too," she said finally.

Mr. Rebeck sat next to her. "Your husband?"

"Uh-huh," said Mrs. Klapper. "Morris. A lot of times I hear him calling, 'Gertrude, Gertrude,' like he'd lost his key again, or he couldn't find the light switch in the bathroom. A year and two months and I still hear him."

"I guess that must happen to a lot of people," Mr. Rebeck said. "You don't want to believe somebody's really dead."

"No," Mrs. Klapper answered. "For me it's different. Maybe for other people it's like that." She nibbled the tip of one black-gloved forefinger, a trait, Mr. Rebeck thought, that he would never have associated with her.

"Morris died funny, you know," she said slowly. Mr. Rebeck said nothing. "We've got a nice apartment—a terrace with a little garden. We rented it, the agent said, 'Look, you got a nice little terrace, you can have dinner on it.' So we had dinner on it, except when it was cold. Anyway, that time we're eating dinner, and I see Morris doesn't look so good. So I say, 'Morris, you don't look so good. You want to go inside and lie down?' And he says, 'No, Gertrude, finish the meal, it shouldn't be a total loss.' I say, 'Okay, Morris, if you feel okay,' and I dish him some corn. Green Giant—on the cob Morris doesn't like it. It gets in his teeth."

"You don't have to tell me this," Mr. Rebeck said. "You don't even know me."

"Gallant," said Michael. "Sneaky, but gallant."

"Excuse me," Mrs. Klapper said. "I want to tell you. It's a relief, and I don't feel so much like I'll bust any more, and besides I won't be seeing you again, anyway." Mr. Rebeck knew this was true, and it made him oddly sad.

"So Morris finishes the corn, and I say, 'Morris, you want some more corn?' and he opens his mouth to say something and *boom!*" Mr. Rebeck jumped. "Right over the back of his chair he falls." Mrs. Klapper swept her arm in a wide semicircle.

"You know what I do then?"

Mr. Rebeck shook his head silently.

"I yell," Mrs. Klapper said bitterly. "I sit there in my chair and I yell. I spent five minutes maybe of Morris's life yelling. Then what do I do?" She swept her arm around again. "*Boom!* Out like a light."

She looked down at her lap. Mr. Rebeck noticed with a strange objectivity that a seam had opened on her right glove.

"Maybe he wakes up," she said in a low voice, "and calls me, 'Gertrude, Gertrude.' He was always losing the key to the apartment. Maybe he lies there calling me, and I don't hear him."

"Don't say that," Mr. Rebeck urged. "You can't possibly know."

"You know what I did for two days after that?" Mrs. Klapper asked. "I went around saying, 'Morris, you want some more corn? Morris, you want some more corn? Morris, you want some more corn?' Like a Victrola and the needle got stuck. Two days. They had a nurse living in the house. She slept in the living room."

She fell silent, unweeping, staring straight ahead. Michael didn't want to say anything. Mr. Rebeck did.

Presently she turned her head and looked at Mr. Rebeck. Her mouth twitched a little at the corners.

"They say Kaddish for Morris every Sabbath," she said, "over at Beth David. After I'm dead they'll be saying Kaddish for him. Every Sabbath until the sky falls." She leaned toward Mr. Rebeck, her breath warm and not unpleasantly sharp. "You think I'd forget Morris? You think I'd forget?"

"No," Mr. Rebeck said. "I don't think you would."

She leaned back, smoothing her black dress over her knees.

Mr. Rebeck stared hard at the word WILDER over the mausoleum entrance until it blurred and flowed before his eyes. All I can think of to say, he thought, is "I like you," and that seems silly. Not to say inappropriate.

Presently Mrs. Klapper began to laugh softly. She laughs like a river, Mr. Rebeck thought, listening to the slow, rolling chuckle. She looked up at him.

"The nurse dyed her hair," she said, punctuating the words with laughter. "And she dyed it so lousily. Different patches black, red, and sort of brownish-blond. She looked like a box of crayons."

They laughed together then, the three of them, Mr. Rebeck's laughter high and chortling; Mrs. Klapper's rich; Michael's dark and silent.

"You think I'm terrible, laughing like this?" Mrs. Klapper asked finally.

"No," Mr. Rebeck said. "No, I don't. You should see how much better you look now."

He hadn't meant that exactly the way it sounded, and he began to amend it, but Mrs. Klapper smiled.

"You have to laugh," she said. "Sooner or later, you have to laugh. How long can you cry?"

"Years," said Michael. Mrs. Klapper shook her head, as if she had heard him. "Sooner or later," she said, "you have to laugh."

She looked at a small gold wristwatch and got up quickly. "I have to go," she said. "My sister's bringing her daughter over for dinner. A little kid she is, my niece, a first-grader. Beautiful." She stretched the word until it twanged. "I better go make dinner."

"I'm going that way myself," Mr. Rebeck said a little timidly.

Mrs. Klapper laughed. "You don't even know which way I'm going."

"Lecherous old man," Michael said. "Control the clammy hands, Tarquin."

Mr. Rebeck felt himself flushing again. He took a wild shot. "The entrance near the subway," he said quickly. There had to be an entrance near a subway. Cemeteries were built like that.

Mrs. Klapper looked at him in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Well, it's the way you're going. There isn't any other entrance that way." Please God there isn't.

Mrs. Klapper nodded. She took a few steps away, stopped, and looked back at him. "So if you're coming," she said, "come."

His mood compounded of equal parts of fright and exhilaration, Mr. Rebeck got to his feet. He looked over at Michael a little appealingly.

"Don't let me stop you," Michael said. "Go dance your life away. Toil not, nor neither spin. I shall sit here and meditate." He waved a hand in the direction of Mrs. Klapper. "Just vanish. I always do."

So Mr. Rebeck took a few steps and found himself at Mrs. Klapper's side.

Michael watched them walk off down the winding path that led to Central Avenue. He felt a little sorry for Mrs. Klapper, sorrier for Mr. Rebeck, and sorriest of all for himself. Immersed in this feeling, he wandered contentedly around the little clearing, soaking in the feeling through what he remembered of his pores, letting himself become logy with sorrow.

A small blackhead erupted in the noon sky. Michael watched it spiral down toward him with a certain lazy interest, until, against the withered sun, he recognized the raven. He had grown used to the bird's regular visits and he enjoyed talking to him. The raven's mocking humor reminded him vaguely of a man whose name he no longer remembered, but with whom he had played cards.

The raven made two gliding passes at the clearing, missed both times, and finally let himself drop ungracefully to the grass. "Damn place ought to have a runway," he grumbled. He carried a small precooked beef tongue in his claws.

"Salutations, bird," Michael hailed him.

The raven ignored him. "Where's Rebeck?"

"Our mutual friend," Michael said, "has gone off with a lady."

"I thought that was him," the raven said. He dropped the beef tongue on the grass. "Tell him I'll bring some milk tonight, if I can get it." He peered at Michael. "What's biting you?"

"I'm desolate," Michael said, "and so should you be. We've been deserted. You're flesh and I'm air, but we are now united in mutual grief, maudlin sorrow, *Weltschmerz,* and bloody damn lonesomeness. I hail you again, winged and lonesome brother."

"Speak for yourself," the raven answered amiably. "I've had my breakfast."

Mr. Rebeck and Mrs. Klapper walked along the road, past the frozen fountains of the willow trees, and Mrs. Klapper talked about the place where she lived, and about the old woman who sat in front of her house on warm days, and about her niece, who was beautiful, and her butcher, who gave you bad meat unless you were a friend of his, and about her husband, who had died. They stopped sometimes to look at the high, empty houses and to admire the angels and children that watched over them, and the swords and sphinxes that guarded them. Then they walked on again, and Mr. Rebeck spoke once in a while, but for the most part he listened to Mrs. Klapper and took pleasure in her words.

He wondered why this should be, why the things this woman was saying should delight him so, particularly when he barely understood them. He knew very well that the great majority of human conversation is meaningless. A man can get through most of his days on stock answers to stock questions, he thought. Once he catches onto the game, he can manage with an assortment of grunts. This would not be so if people listened to each other, but they don't. They know that no one is going to say anything moving and important to them at that very moment. Anything important will be announced in the newspapers and reprinted for those who missed it. No one really wants to know how his neighbor is feeling, but he asks him anyway, because it is polite, and because he knows that his neighbor certainly will not tell him how he feels. What this woman and I say to each other is not important. It is the simple making of sounds that pleases us.

Mrs. Klapper was talking about a little boy who lived on her block. "Eleven years old," she said, "and every time I meet him with his mother, he's written a new poem. And always she says to him, 'Herbie, tell Mrs. Klapper your new poem.' She hits him until he says the poem. Eleven years old he is, last March."

"Are the poems any good?" Mr. Rebeck asked.

"What do I know from poems, I should give an opinion? They're all about death and burying people, always. This from a boy eleven years old. I feel like telling her, 'Look, keep him away from me with the obituary column. He writes a poem about a bird, about a dog, bring him around.' But I never tell her. Why should I hurt the boy's feelings? I see them coming, I cross the street."

She said, "Look, here we are already," and Mr. Rebeck looked up to see the black gate.

The gate was of cast iron, set into turreted pillars of sand-colored concrete. Dark green ivy covered it, twined a little thicker than ivy generally grows, and cast-iron snakes with patient eyes pushed their resigned way through the ivy. It was topped with a row of blunt spikes, and it stood open. Mr. Rebeck could see the street outside.

"Here we are already," Mrs. Klapper marveled. "Such a short walk when you're talking to someone."

"Yes," Mr. Rebeck said.

The gate had held up well over nineteen years, he thought, much better than he himself had. The black paint had cracked in several places, and the rusted metal showed through. But it was a strong gate still. He had shaken it one night and rasped his hands on the mouths of rust, but the bars had not shivered, nor the lock rattled. That had been—how long ago? Twelve years, fifteen. All he remembered was that he had wanted to get out of the cemetery, and the gate had been locked, because it was late at night. He had shaken at the gate all night long, and cut his hands badly. But when the morning came, and the gate was opened, he did not go out. He hid in the lavatory and ran cold water on his bleeding hands. Then he went back to his mausoleum and slept.

"Well," Mrs. Klapper said. "You take the subway?"

He mumbled something affirmative, thinking, I should never have come with her. How can I tell her that I cannot pass the gate, that I live in this place? She would not believe me. She would think I was joking, or mad. I made a mistake when I asked to walk with her. I don't know why I did it.

"So come on," Mrs. Klapper said. She tapped her foot and smiled at him. "What are you waiting for? The subway should come to you?"

Yes. That would be a fine idea. If it did, I would get on it. We would go underground, and I would never see the gate, or know that I had left the cemetery until we climbed up a flight of stairs cut out of the ground, and people were all around us. I could manage that, if the subway came to me. And if I were with someone.

Looking at his thin wrist, he had an idea. He crooked his left arm in front of him and said, "Why, I've lost my watch."

"What's this?" Mrs. Klepper asked. "You lost something?"

"My wristwatch." He tried to smile ruefully, but only one corner of his mouth moved, and that twitched like something cut and in pain. "I know I had it on when I came in, and now it's gone. I must have dropped it somewhere."

Mrs. Klapper was properly sympathetic. "What a thing to happen. Was it very valuable, your watch?"

"No," he said, determined not to make this too much of a lie. "But I've had it a long time, and I was very fond of it. It kept good time."

"Tell the man there," Mrs. Klapper suggested, pointing toward the caretaker's office. "Give him your address, he'll let you know when he finds it."

Mr. Rebeck shook his head. "I'd better go back and look for it. Somebody might pick it up. Or it might rain."

"Ai, you'll go hunting all over the cemetery, it'll take hours. You'll break your back. You want I should come with you?"

Say no. Say no, or you'll have to lie to her again. And you're a terrible liar, and nineteen years out of practice.

"Don't bother," he said. "It's not worth it. I think I know where I dropped it. It's a very long walk."

"Well, I hope you find it," Mrs. Klapper said. "Get the man to help you if you can't find it by yourself."

They shook hands.

"It was very nice talking to you," Mr. Rebeck said. "I'm sorry we can't continue it."

Mrs. Klapper shrugged. "So maybe we'll meet again. You come around here a lot?"

"Yes. I like walking here."

"Me too. Anyway, I come to see Morris sometimes. So maybe we'll run into each other."

"Maybe," Mr. Rebeck said. "Good-by."

"Good-by. I hope you find your watch."

He did not wait to see her walk away. Instead, he turned quickly from her and walked back up the wide road, looking at the ground as a man would if he had lost something small and valued. Only when he reached the top of the hill did he turn and look back. She was gone by then.

I hate lying and saying good-by, he thought, because I am not very good at either.

IV

THE THREE PEOPLE who had not left the cemetery stood over the grave. One of the men was less paunchy than the other. The woman's nails were broad and curved, the color of old milk.

"She was such a good girl," the woman said hoarsely. The men nodded.

"Not exactly," said Laura Durand. She sat on the grass next to Michael and looked at the three people. "I was just tired."

" 'Good' is the only word for her," said the younger man. He had a clear, precise voice. "The only word that really fitted her."

"All my life," said Laura, nodding.

"So young," the woman said. She swayed a little, and the old man put his arm around her.

"I was twenty-nine," Laura said, "pushing fifty. I told people I was thirty-three because it saved questions about why I liked books."

"And so pretty," the younger man said in his typewriter voice. "So alive, so vital."

"Oh, Gary," Laura murmured a little sadly. She turned to Michael. "I looked like an elementary-school teacher."

Gary patted the woman on the shoulder a good deal and craned his neck to look at his wristwatch.

"He wants to go back to the bookstore," Laura explained. "He gets nervous if he's away from it too long. Two years ago he had appendicitis, and they operated right on the Social Sciences counter."

"We were more than mother and daughter," the woman keened. "We were friends. Isn't that so, Carl?" The old man tightened his grip on her shoulders.

"Yes, Mother," Laura said softly. "Friendship's better than nothing." She half rose, then relaxed again. "Can I speak to them?" Michael shook his head.

"She was a wonderful worker." That was Gary again. "Efficient. Always there when I needed her. I don't know how I'm going to get along without her now."

"You'll manage, Gary," Laura said. "The world's full of me." She glanced at Michael. "I had a crush on him for a while, the kind of crush you get when you get fed up with square dancing at the YWCA. He never knew, and it went away gradually, like athlete's foot."

The old man spoke for the first time. His voice was low and slightly accented. "It is time to go, Marian."

"I don't want to leave her." The mother was weeping now, quietly and steadily. Gary took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and gave it to her.

"Gary always has a handkerchief," Laura said, smiling, "Matches, too."

"We had better go," Gary said, making a vague motion to the old man over the woman's bent head. "They probably close up soon."

"I don't want to go." Michael watched the tears slipping from under the handkerchief with a kind of greediness. He had not seen anyone cry for a long while.

"Marian—" the old man said again.

"Wait a little. Please wait a little."

"Go away!" Laura was suddenly on her feet, her arms pressed tightly against her sides. "Go away, damn it!" It looked to Michael as if she might cry herself, but he knew better. He remained seated, his legs crossed, and thought that she had nice hair.

The people were going away now. The woman was still crying. Gary and the old Carl flanked her, walking slowly and staring straight ahead. They looked, Michael thought, as if they had just seen a play they hadn't cared for, whose author was sure to ask their opinion the next morning. He watched them walk, observing through death-honed eyes the way their feet slid and scuffed through the scattered gravel; watching Carl put his hands in his pockets and take them out a few seconds later, over and over again; frowning with Gary when a pebble got into his shoe. The pebble felt very real against a hastily summoned up instep-memory as he watched the younger man shake his foot in a sidewise pawing motion. And he sighed with Gary when the pebble finally lodged under the arch of his foot.

Laura cried out suddenly and started to run after them. Her hands were stretched in front of her, as if she were about to fall, and she ran constrictedly and without grace.

"It's no good," Michael called after her. "You can't touch them"—but she had stopped already and was walking very quickly back toward him. Her hands were opening and shutting slowly, but she was quite calm.

"I don't know why I did that," she said, sitting next to him again. "I knew it was useless."

"Don't admit it," Michael said sharply. "Never admit it."

Laura looked a little puzzled. "I don't mind." She looked around her. "Are these foothills of Heaven? I'm sure I'll go to Heaven. I've been dull enough."

"This is the Yorkchester Cemetery," Michael answered, "and Heaven and Hell are only for the living."

"A pity." Laura tried to pluck a blade of grass, and Michael winced for her when her fingers went through it. She showed no emotion, except for closing her hands and pressing them into her lap.

Michael vaguely remembered a very old book, its binding hanging in strings. He associated a quotation with it and felt a disproportionate pleasure in doing so. " 'Into Paradise,' " he said slowly, " 'go those aged priests and those old cripples, and the maimed, who all day long and all night cough before the altars. With them I have nought to do.' "

Laura looked up, smiling, and snapped her fingers silently. " 'But in hell will I go,' " she quoted triumphantly. " 'For to hell go the fair clerks and the fair knights . . . there go the fair and courteous ladies—' " She frowned and shook her head slightly. "I forget . . ."

" 'There go the fair and courteous ladies,' " Michael picked up, " 'who have friends, two or three, together with their wedded lords. And there pass the gold and silver, the ermine and all rich furs, harpers and minstrels, and the happy of the world.' "

Laura finished the last line with him. "I read that," she said, "when I was seventeen or eighteen and terribly sad. Where did you read it?"

"My wife liked it. She used to quote it all the time."

Laura was silent for a moment. "Funny. I know that by heart, and yet when I tried to remember it just now I felt it slipping out of my mind, squirming when I reached for it as if it were something wild I'd captured."

"Hang on to it as tightly as you can," Michael said, "as long as you can."

"I never hang on to things," Laura answered. "I'm in favor of setting things free." She rose and walked slowly over to her grave. "Don't I get a stone?" she asked. "I thought everybody got a headstone."

"I haven't got one either," Michael said. "I think it comes later. The ground has to get used to you."

"My stone will be small and very plain. Marian believes in simplicity. Just my name and my two big moments: 'Laura Durand. 1929-1958.' And a line of poetry." She hesitated and then smiled. " 'Hail to thee, blithe spirit.' I'd bet on it."

"Give thanks. You might have gotten, 'I will arise and go now.' "

"Oh, Mother's Poetry Club isn't up to Yeats yet," Laura said. "Not till the week after Hopkins."

She reached out to touch the mound and pulled her hand back. "Am I there? My body, I mean?" Michael did not answer, nor did she turn to him. "How strange."

"How did you get out so fast?" Michael asked. "I took a pretty long while getting out, but you sprouted like a geranium before the funeral was even over."

"A nice image," Laura said.

"Thank you. You should have heard me when I was alive." He waited for an answer. It was long in coming.

"Maybe you weren't quite ready to die," Laura said. "I was way overdue."

Michael said nothing. They moved aimlessly away from the grave, walking without purpose, without destination, without consciousness of motion, but always with grace. Michael turned his head to watch Laura move. The grass did not bend under her feet, nor did the few fallen leaves crackle indignantly. A small wind lifted the leaves and the marshmallow-colored spores of a broken milkweed pod, but not her hair.

Laura spoke very quietly, never once turning to him. "I represent," she said, "five minutes of wasted effort on the part of either God or my father. Death isn't so much of a change. It's as if I lived high over a noisy city and couldn't sleep because the window was jammed and the auto horns reached over the windowsill. Now I've shut the window and the horns have fallen back to the street. I'm very sleepy and I want to go to bed." Michael heard her laugh softly. "That's not a bad image, either. A little overwrought, perhaps."

"I've wedged the window open," Michael said.

"Only in your room," said Laura, "and not for long."

They stood looking at each other, each seeing a gray film over a small portion of the world.

"I've been dead for two weeks," Michael said, "and I've learned a couple of things. The big difference between the dead and the living is that the dead don't care about anything."

"That explains a good deal."

Michael missed the sarcasm. "Yes, it does. Caring about things is much more important to the dead because it's all they have to keep them conscious. Without it they fade, dwindle, thin to the texture of a whisper. The same thing happens to people, but nobody notices it because their bodies act as masks. The dead have no masks. They left them behind."

"Go on."

"A man I met told me all this a while ago. I didn't understand it at all then. I do now. What he didn't tell me was that, if you struggle, you can stay awake. It's like freezing. You have to keep walking up and down and stamping your feet. Otherwise the cold gets you."

"Here, too," Laura whispered, looking away from him. "I thought it might be warm."

"That's the easy way," Michael said. "That's what all the others did; wrapped themselves in the earth and fell asleep. All of them. I woke a couple up and tried to make them talk to me, but their talk was like snoring." His tone was full of contempt. "They've forgotten everything. Their minds have turned to sand. I still remember. I've forgotten a few things, but important ones I keep."

"Yes. It probably takes longer to forget the important things."

Michael shook his head. "No. It's a sort of weeding-out process—like picking out ten books to be cast away with. You'll see." He smiled, mentally admitting the conscious effort it was but hoping that the girl did not notice. "I'm glad you're here. We can make things easier for each other. That's part of being alive."

Laura turned abruptly and began to walk slowly back toward her grave. Michael followed, puzzled. "Where are you going?"

"To sleep," Laura said over her shoulder. "That's part of being alive too."

"Wait a minute!" Michael called. "Don't leave me alone!"

"Why not? That's another part of life. The big one. You can't have forgotten that—it's too important. If you want to be alive, you have to accept all the parts. You can't choose and you can't reject what doesn't please you. That's the privilege of the dead."

"You have to fight!" Michael shouted after her. "I know that now. Giving up the fight is death."

Laura stopped and faced him. "Death is not having to fight any more, either for yourself or for other people. I don't care what you do with your afterlife. You can take woodworking courses, or play correspondence chess, or subscribe to a lot of magazines, or start a repertory theater. Just do it quietly. I'm tired, and I've been up much too late."

Michael ran after her and caught up with her at the grave. She was standing quietly, looking at the grass. "What killed you?" he demanded. He felt clumsy and exceedingly pompous, but he also felt himself washed in anger, and the feeling was familiar and very pleasant. "Were you bored to death?"

"I was hit by a truck," Laura said, "and all of a sudden everybody realized that I was dead. Go away, whatever your name is—"

"Michael Morgan."

"That's fine. Go away, Michael Morgan, and write a letter to the editor. Fight the brave fight. The result is the same as the cowardly fight. The brave fight is just a retreat with publicity. You'll have a fine time. I'm going to sleep."

She lay down on her grave and promptly began to experience difficulty in disposing of her arms. She folded them on her breast, spread them out in the position of a crucifix, kept them to her sides, and finally crossed them on her stomach. She closed her eyes and almost immediately opened them again to look up at Michael.

"Now what? Do I just lie here, on top of the blankets, as it were, or can I get back into my coffin?"

"You can't go back," Michael said coldly. "Once you're out, you're out. Just lie there and think how nice it is without those damn birds waking you up every morning."

Laura smiled and closed her eyes. Michael turned and walked off. He thought he heard her say, "Good night, Michael," but he kept walking, furious at the contentment in her voice. He was sure he heard her laugh.

Out of sight of her grave, he sat down on a stone. He was so angry that he forgot what sitting down was like and got all snarled up in midair. On the fourth try he made it and sat with his remembered chin in recalled hand. He remembered the size and shape of his hands pretty well, but he had never taken much interest in his face and, as a result, its remembered corners and angles varied considerably from moment to moment. Right now his chin was more pointed than it had been, and more angled from his jawline, but he had forgotten.

She took the easy way out, he thought. Fall asleep—forget everything—be nothing. That's not my way. He thought of the athletes and Big Men on Campus he had known during his college career. The athletes towered over him on the stairs and talked to one another in short, heavy sentences, and he felt properly scornful of their gum-chewing acceptance of life, their C's in the two-credit psychology courses they took, and, most of all, their laughing, ring-waisted girls. I'm bound to a higher road, he had told himself, and possessed by a much more demanding mistress. He spent a few wistful seconds imagining the mistress. The Big Men chatted pleasantly in the halls, in the cafeteria, speaking of dances, pep rallies, student productions, elections, and fund-raising drives. They were neatly dressed, they belonged to honorary fraternities, and when they were asked questions in classes they managed somehow to make a speech out of the answer. The football players greeted them as equals; *they* greeted the football players as inferiors but fine fellows nevertheless. And when they graduated public-relations firms and advertising companies snapped them up as if they were after-dinner mints.

Phonies, Michael had thought and, sitting on the stone, thought again. False and phoney. Not for me, boy. I'm awake. I'm conscious. I know that life is strange, surprising, cruel, merciless, real, earnest. Check one. Let them be applauded, subsidized, loved; I've got my integrity.

He had used the word "integrity" often in college and managed to irritate a good many people with it. Most of them were professors. One, an associate in the English Department, had snapped, "Morgan, you have no more knowledge of the meaning of that word than a barracuda."

Michael had been indignant. "It means being true to yourself, whatever yourself is," he retorted. "And I like to think I'm true to myself."

"Mmmm," said the professor thoughtfully. "Well, cheat a little. A bit of adultery would do you a lot of good."

He had been sure of no one's honesty but his own and prided himself on the honesty with which he admitted the honesty of his reasoning. Now he wasn't quite sure. "For a wild minute there," he said aloud, "I thought I had the answer to death." He thought of the girl.

Remembering Laura Durand smiling on the grass of her grave, familiar and at ease with death, he felt tired and as sick of himself as he had ever felt after fighting with Sandra. I must be a bit of a manic-depressive, he thought wearily, and then descended into happy self-abasement as curiously as if he had been going down a stone stairway into a cellar nightclub he had never before visited. He decided, among other things, that he had not only been a fool to enlist in the Korean War, he had been something of a hypocrite to come out of it alive. He had about concluded that he would go and say good-by to Mr. Rebeck, whose patience he now regarded as Christlike, if pointless, and then find his own grave and let the straining muscles of his memory go limp, when he saw Laura walking slowly toward him.

First he felt like springing up and running to meet her. Then he thought he would wait for her to reach him and then say, "The bathroom's back near the entrance"—oh, real heavy, real Sinatra. Don't come sneaking around *me*, lady. This is Michael Morgan, as pure as mountain spring water, as unforgiving as God. Finally he sat where he was, looking at the ground as if he had lost something.

Her legs came gradually into his field of vision and stopped. She was looking down at him, he knew, and he waited impatiently for her to say something. He wondered if ghosts ever had nervous breakdowns.

"Hello, Michael," she said finally. He looked up and blinked in surprise. Admirable, laddy, admirable. These honored dead have not died in vain.

"I didn't hear you coming."

Laura smiled faintly. "The dead make good neighbors." She paused. He did not budge. Budge thee not, boy. As immovable as Kafka's doorman.

"I don't want to go to sleep right away," she said. "After all" —fumbling for words—"I've got time enough. I thought—if you weren't doing anything"—neither of them laughed—"we could walk a little. I don't know this place at all—" She faltered under what Michael fondly believed was an unwinking glare. "All right. I couldn't fall asleep. I'm still conscious and I might as well do something with it. Will you come or not? It doesn't matter to me."

Michael got up and began to walk toward the Old Rich section of the cemetery. "Come on," he said.

Laura came up alongside him. "Where are we going?"

Michael spoke so low she could barely hear him. "I know. I do know now. The dead can't sleep." He looked inquiringly at her, and she nodded.

"When I closed my eyes—it didn't make any difference. It was just as if I had them open."

"We don't sleep," Michael said. "We doze from time to time. The ones I talked to were just pretending to have been asleep. Pretending—to themselves more than me." He quickened his stride.

"Where are we going?"

"To see a man."

"A ghost?"

"No, a man. I wasn't sure till just now."

"Would you have believed me?" Mr. Rebeck asked. He sat on the steps of the Wilder mausoleum, looking thin and fine-boned in an old black-and-white-checked bathrobe.

"Probably not," said Michael. "You could have tried, though."

"Good heavens, you had enough trouble believing you were dead. And I didn't convince you of that—you convinced yourself." Mr. Rebeck hesitated, arranging his words as if they were a gin hand: "In our society, you have two choices, two possible beliefs. Either you go somewhere after you die, or you don't. Either you sing very loudly through eternity, or else you sleep quietly until the world crumbles away around you and you go sailing on through space, unwaking and unwakened. Neither belief is true, but you have to find that out for yourself."

"I was hoping for sleep," Laura said. "My last word on earth was probably 'Hurrah!' "

"You'll drowse," Mr. Rebeck answered, "and that's almost like sleeping. In time, sleep won't mean anything to you because you'll lose the concept. You won't know whether you're awake or asleep, and it won't really matter." He paused. "And you're still on earth. There isn't any special world for the dead, only cold rooms the living grant them out of respect for their used bodies. There is only earth."

He realized that a certain oracular solemnity had been wedging its way into his words, but he could think of nothing to say to relieve its weight. Looking at the man and woman, he thought tiredly that things always became complicated in the end; webs became tangled whether the spider's intent was to deceive or not. He liked this man and woman very much, and he wished they wouldn't make him phrase things he himself wasn't sure of until he spoke them. He was neither God nor the First Gravedigger—and then there was Mrs. Klapper.

Laura was saying something. A mellifluous name, he thought. I wish she were far away, so I could call her.

"How long will it take?" Laura was asking.

Mr. Rebeck blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Forgetting. Disintegrating. Letting things go."

"Oh, I see." Of course, Michael would have told her. "It depends. A month seems to be about average."

"A month? What happens then?"

"I don't know." Of course I don't know. I'm not the Answer Man. He wondered if that program was still on the radio. Probably not. He should have asked Mrs. Klapper.

"I can wait," Laura said.

Michael laughed. "You'll have to."

Laura looked at him as if he were something half-eaten and discarded. "What a wonderful Messiah you'd have made."

"True. My first miracle would have been raising you from the dead. With a steam shovel probably."

"You're like an old man in a small town," Laura said, "who used to be somebody important and still hangs around the place where he used to work, making speeches on holidays and playing at still being important."

"Maybe," Michael said tightly. "But I'll sit on your grave each Christmas and sing carols to you."

"Oh, for God's sake," Mr. Rebeck thought, "shut up!"

Not until he saw the astonished looks on their faces did he realize that he had said it aloud. Committed, he charged on. "What difference does it make which of you remembers his name longer? You're both dead. That may be the only thing you have in common, but it's a big one. You make my head hurt. If you feel like bickering so much, go off and yap among the stones. Death ought to be a quiet, easy thing, like love. You spend your time yelling that you won't sleep or that you can't sleep, when you don't even know what sleep is."

He saw the childishly startled looks on their translucent faces and suddenly could think of nothing else to say. He had not shouted at anybody for a very long while, and his voice sounded echoey and cavernous. A crazy image of bats nesting in his cheeks and hanging head down from the roof of his mouth scuttled across his mind, and he very nearly giggled.

"I've been here quite a long time, you know," he added. Then he sat and looked away because he was finished speaking.

Laura started to say something but called it back. She made a small, meaningless gesture to Michael, who nodded and leaned forward, hoping that Mr. Rebeck would look up at him. "Why did you come here?"

Mr. Rebeck did look up then. "I died, like everybody else," he said; then, seeing Laura wince, added, "No, that's too easy to say and not really true." He looked at Michael. "I told you I used to be a druggist, I think."

Michael nodded.

"I had a nice drugstore," Mr. Rebeck said. "It smelled. I mean, it was clean but it smelled nice. Like gunpowder and cinnamon, with a little chocolate, maybe. I had a bell that rang when somebody opened the door, and it rang for whatever a person needed, whether it was on his prescription or not. And I had a pair of scales that could weigh a man's heart. I didn't have a soda fountain, but I had a jar of candy to give the children when they came in to buy cough syrup or razor blades. Coltsfoot candy, they called it. I don't know why. It came in long yellow sticks. I don't think they sell it any more. I had everything any other druggist in New York had, and a little wolfbane besides."

A small breeze had sprung up, and Mr. Rebeck pulled his bathrobe closer around him and put his hands in the pockets.

"Once a man asked me to make a love potion for him. He was a good man, but very ugly, with a scarred face. He was a fighter, I think, because of his ears, and because he used to come in and have coffee with me and talk about boxing. There was a girl who used to come in and sit with us sometimes. She looked a little like you, Laura, only her hair was blond. A very smart girl. The man asked me to make up something to make her love him. He was ashamed of his face, you see, and he thought it would be so easy for me to do, like whipping up a malted. I couldn't do it, of course, not really, because it's illegal, and I didn't know anyway. But I told him I would, only it wouldn't make her aggressive, just receptive. He'd still have to do the asking, face or no face."

He smiled, thinking about it. "She was a very nice girl, and I think she loved him anyway. But after that, everybody started to come in, asking for love potions and horoscopes and lucky charms and wanting to know what their dreams meant. People are unhappy, you know, and they'll try anything to change their luck. They acted as if I were a witch or a tame warlock, pleading with me to make their children well or make their husbands quit drinking. I told them I couldn't do it, that I wasn't a magician, and some wept and some cursed me. Those were very sad curses, without much strength. So I made a very big mistake. I said I would try.

"I thought, I am a druggist. I try to help sick people. These people are sick also, in a different way. Perhaps I could help them in a different way. And I tried, which was wrong, because there isn't any magician in the world. But they needed me, I thought, and a man must be needed. So I ground up harmless little herbs and told them to sprinkle them in their food, and I told them to sleep with little bags of flour under their pillows and their dreams would be good. I was a witch doctor, a witch doctor in New York. I hadn't meant to be, but I was. And, to make matters worse, I wasn't a very good witch doctor. Sometimes I was lucky, sometimes I guessed right and the child got well, or the number was the right one. But not very often. The people who didn't believe in all this mumbo-jumbo stopped coming, and the people who did believe stopped coming because it wasn't very effective mumbo-jumbo."

Mr. Rebeck's hands twisted the belt of the robe around and around each other, but he was still smiling faintly. "Only the really dedicated crackpots remained, and a druggist is probably the one man in the world who can't find some use for them. But I served them because they were lonely and they believed in me. I was their prophet, a prophet fallen on evil days, perhaps, but not without honor. So I felt a little important sometimes."

He began to laugh quietly, in genuine amusement, smoothing his thin hair with a brown hand. "I knew something was going to happen sooner or later. What I was doing was illegal for anybody, and twice as criminal for a druggist. If a new customer came into the store—which did happen every once in a while—I'd have to brace myself against the counter to keep from running. Policemen always frightened me when I was young, and besides I was afraid I'd lose my license if anybody started checking up on me. And there wasn't anything else in the world I was equipped to do."

He settled back against one of the cracked pillars that fended off the sky from the Wilder tomb. "And then the funniest thing happened, the most logical thing in the world. I went bankrupt." Mr. Rebeck, having a good sense of the dramatic, paused for a moment and then went on. "I couldn't pay the rent, I couldn't pay for my stock, I couldn't pay for upkeep, I couldn't pay for electricity, and I couldn't pay the lawyer who told the court I couldn't pay for anything. When I left that court I'd have gone over the hill to the poorhouse, except that the city didn't have a poorhouse, and I didn't have the carfare."

"And you came here?" Laura had not taken her eyes from his face.

"No," said Mr. Rebeck. "Not right away. I was still young, you know, about Michael's age. I thought, Jonathan, you've got your whole life ahead of you, and you can't very well spend it living off oranges and cigarette butts. So I got a job as a clerk in a grocery because they let me sleep in the back of the store. I worked there for a couple of months and saved up some money and bought some new shirts. Then I went for a walk one night and passed the place where my store used to be. They had built a chain drugstore there. A big, clean drugstore with a counter made of green marble."

Now he did look away, clasping his hands tightly together. "And I thought," he said very softly, "how funny it all was. Because they were doing the same thing I'd been doing, only with advertising. Their signs said, 'We will make you beautiful, we will make you smell good, we will cure your kidney stones and your hemorrhoids and your bad breath and your dandruff and your bad manners. We will smooth your skin and pluck away forty pounds as if we were removing a wart—which we also do very well—and people will want to talk to you. Come unto us, all ye that are ugly and ill-tempered and alone—' " He paused. "It's wrong to promise magic to people. It was wrong when I did it, and it was wrong for this clean new drugstore. I walked a long way that night, thinking many philosophic thoughts which, fortunately, I don't remember." He laughed shortly and fell silent.

"And then?" Michael's voice jerked Mr. Rebeck's head around sharply, as if there had been a string between them.

"Then," Mr. Rebeck answered calmly, "I got drunk enough for a wedding and a wake put together and I wandered in here singing to myself—they just latched the gate in those days—and I fell asleep on the top step here and slept for a day."

He shrugged. "And there you are. I stayed. At first I thought I'd just rest for a while, because I was very tired, but the raven brought me food—" He grinned suddenly. "The raven was there when I woke up, waiting for me. He told me he'd bring me food as long as I stayed, and when I asked why, he said it was because we had one thing in common. We both had delusions of kindness."

Mr. Rebeck yawned. "I'm tired," he said, almost apologetically, "and I want to go to bed." He stood up and stretched, and the bathrobe tightened around his thin body.

"I told you death was like life, Michael," he said sleepily. "It doesn't make much difference whether you fight or not." He turned to Laura. "Except to you. Each man's death is his own concern, and whether he sleeps or doesn't sleep is of less importance than how he accepts it—or how he rationalizes it." He walked slowly to the mausoleum door and turned. "Good night."

"Good night," they said. "Good night."

He closed the door, took off his robe, and lay down on a mattress made largely of small cushions arranged in a pattern that kept him reasonably comfortable. He pulled a blanket over himself and lay quietly on his back, staring at the ceiling.

Someone spoke his name, and he realized that Michael was in the room. He had wondered how long it would take Michael to realize that no physical barriers affected him now. "Yes, Michael?"

"Would you do me a favor?"

"Probably. What is it?"

Michael's voice was hesitant. "Could you tell me—could you tell me how this girl looks?"

"Laura?"

"Mmm-hmm. I'm just curious."

"You can't see her, I gather?"

"Just as a sort of general outline. Hair, shape—I know she's a woman, but that's about it."

"Yes," said Mr. Rebeck. He was silent.

"Well?"

"Oh. Well, she's dark. Her eyes are gray, I think, and she has long fingers."

"Is that all?"

"Michael, what difference can it make now?"

"None," said Michael after a moment. "I was just curious. Sorry I bothered you."

"Good night."

Michael was gone. It will be a nice summer, Mr. Rebeck said to himself. I've needed company.

He thought about the autumn. He had never liked the season, partly because looking ahead to it spoiled the spring a little for him. I look too far ahead, he thought, because I am afraid of suddenly coming face to face with things. He had never been able to enjoy the Christmas holidays in his childhood because they seemed to skid him helplessly toward the long January.

But the night was warm and scented, and he dismissed the autumn. It will come, he thought, as it always does. But first, the summer.

V

Mrs. Klapper had set the alarm for nine-thirty, and now she waited patiently for it to ring. She lay on her side, facing away from the clock, her legs drawn up and one arm under the pillow. The blankets had been pulled so tightly up to her chin that they had come loose at the end of the bed and her feet were uncovered. She crossed her ankles and rubbed her feet against each other, but her feet remained cold, and she felt oddly vulnerable.

Rolling over on her back, she flung out an arm and became aware, as she did every morning, that nobody was there to be hit and snarl a complaint out of a half-dream.

The bed was too big, she thought. She'd go down to Sachs today or tomorrow and trade it in. "What do you need with a double bed, Klapper?" she demanded of the ceiling. "You expecting guests?"

The alarm clock made a small, self-satisfied click, and Mrs. Klapper tensed in expectancy. But the alarm did not ring, and the clock hummed innocently to itself. "So ring already!" Mrs. Klapper relaxed disgustedly. "It's by now ten o'clock, ten-thirty. What do you want, I should send you an engraved invitation?" The clock expressed no preference.

"Ai, the wonders of science," said Mrs. Klapper and turned groaningly over to look at the clock face. Her eyes looked cautiously out through her heavy lids, like two sentinels spying out enemy territory. She brushed her hair away from her face and looked closer at the dial. "You're supposed to glow in the dark, you know," she reminded it conversationally. "So glow a little." She finally made out the time to be nine-fifteen.

Mrs. Klapper fell back onto the pillow. "Fifteen minutes. I still got fifteen minutes." She was silent, then turned back to shout at the clock, "So what do I do for fifteen minutes? Tell myself jokes?" She turned over and burrowed into the pillow.

She could always get up, of course, she thought. It would at least give her the pleasure of shutting off the alarm. The idea delighted her. She reached out an arm toward the clock and then pulled it back. There wasn't any rush.

If I don't get up, she thought, I'll get such a headache. That nearly got her out of bed; she feared pain and endured it, when it came, with the stoicism of the deeply afraid. She pushed the covers back and started to sit up. Halfway erect, she changed her mind. And if I get up, all I got to look forward to is not getting a headache. Big deal. She lay down again.

An urge possessed her to look over her shoulder at the clock and find out how many minutes she had to go before she could get up in honesty. But that would have been a moral victory for the clock, and Mrs. Klapper knew the value of moral victories. She collected them. So she lay motionless, one arm lying heavy on her thigh, and thought quite directly about the strange small man in the cemetery. She had thought about him a lot during the twelve days that had passed since she had visited her husband's tomb.

The small man bothered her because she could not come to any definite conclusion about him. A gentleman, she had decided tentatively. A gentleman with a screw loose. But the decision did not satisfy her. Mrs. Klapper had met gentlemen with screws loose before; Morris's law firm had seemed to specialize in them. The man she had met was not one of these.

This clock was electric and guaranteed noiseless. Actually, it made a small humming sound that Mrs. Klapper found infinitely annoying. Ticking she understood, and she loved the sound for the memories it brought back of the nights when she and Morris had lain side by side on the low bed with the thin mattress and there had been no sound but the jagged ticktock teeth biting pieces out of the night. Sometimes, if she listened for a long while, the ticking had seemed to speed up, to rush and thunder through dark tunnels in search of something just ahead, something that would be waiting only a little farther on, hunched and glowing redly. Then she would grasp Morris's arm, as if it were a banister on a long and crooked stairway, and pull herself close to him, holding him so tightly that he would move sleepily and say, "Gertrude, a little air here, please. You are not married to an accordion."

And then it would be all right. Morris was there, solid and warm and complaining, and the clock was just a clock, and she would just lie awake for a minute more, breathing deeply and quietly, and then she would turn in to face Morris and go to sleep—

The alarm went off, buzzing like a dentist's drill, and Mrs. Klapper sprang out of bed and pounced on it, shutting it off. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and said, "Hell," in an abstracted tone. Her head did hurt a little.

She got up and went from window to window, opening the blinds to let the sun flow into the big room. Standing in the sunlight, blinking a bit, she stretched and yawned with the same sensual appreciation of a good stretch and yawn that animals and children have. "A little exercise maybe, Klapper?" she asked herself aloud. "Bend down and touch your toes." Looking incuriously at her bare feet, she decided against it. "Silly way to start the morning."

Wandering slowly in the direction of her dresser, she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror set into the closet door. She began to take off the faded blue pajamas. "*Vey Gott*, Klapper, you look like a bunch of bananas." She opened the closet quickly and looked inside for a slip.

Mrs. Klapper dressed slowly, picking her clothes carefully. It was hot already; wherever she turned, she could feel the sun on the back of her neck. She made a mental note to take a shower that night, and wash her hair as well. As she dressed, she sang a small song about a girl whose mother offered her a choice of husbands-elect, all of them rich, successful men, but who refused them all to marry a penniless rabbinical student. "Dope," she said at the end of the song, as she always did, but, as always, she said it with kindness.

Dressed, her face washed—she had worn no makeup since Morris's death—she went into the kitchen to boil a couple of eggs. She set the timer for fifteen minutes, because she liked her eggs hard and firm, and because it was fifteen minutes during which she could move quickly around in the kitchen, running water and shutting it off, lighting small fires on the stove and then turning them off, ferreting in the refrigerator and cupboards, planning her meals for the rest of the day, and sometimes the days beyond. The dining room was quiet and much too big, and she did not like eating there any more. She continued eating at the too long table, however, because she was very much a creature of habit. Habits were secure and comforting and lent a certain purpose to the day.

She made toast as an afterthought and brought it and the eggs into the dining room. After setting them on the table, she went back into the kitchen for a container of milk. Mrs. Klapper ate with gusto, for she enjoyed food.

While she ate, she thought about Mr. Rebeck again. His abrupt leave-taking at the cemetery gates bothered her. So maybe he did lose his watch, she reflected. This happens. She stabbed the last of the boiled eggs with her fork. But to walk all the way back to find it, and not knowing if maybe you dropped it along the way or lost it on the subway or left it home—this, believe me, is crazy. She shrugged, spreading the toast with cherry preserve. So maybe he's got a wife, he doesn't want to go home just yet. Don't be nosy, Klapper.

Did he have a wife? Mrs. Klapper bit off a piece of toast, liking the crunching sound. Since when does a married man go wandering around a graveyard like he's taking inventory? A married man goes to a graveyard, he goes to see his wife's relatives. Maybe he wasn't married, then.

He did look like Morris, she thought. Morris was a little bigger, maybe, and his eyebrows were bushy, like the tails of angry cats, but the eyes were the same, and the shape of the head. Morris crouched over whatever he was doing, whether it was playing chess, reading a book, or preparing a brief. She had teased him about it, saying, "Morris, you keep on sitting like that, you will go to your grave hunchbacked. A special wing they'll have to stick onto your coffin."

Morris had given that slight laugh of his that you could miss if you weren't listening closely and said, "I like to think of myself as looking like a question mark." And now, seeing this small man playing chess all by himself, hunched over the board as if he were about to spring on it—

"Stop it, Klapper," she said sharply. "You are a grown woman. An overgrown woman, if I may say so." She poured a glass of milk, gulped it hastily, and took the dishes back into the kitchen.

After washing the dishes, which she did with much unnecessary splashing of water and fiddling with the faucets, she opened the broom closet near the refrigerator and took out a broom and a dustpan. She was not a good sweeper. The motion utilized in sweeping is not a particularly natural one, nor is it usually graceful, and the quality of the sweeper can almost always be judged directly from his form. Mrs. Klapper swept the floor as if she were expecting it to wince under the broom. She hated dustpans because whenever she squatted down and choked up on the broomhandle to sweep the dirt into the pan there was always a little dust left over at the rim. She would move the pan back and, subvocalizing curses, attack the dust again. But there would always be a thread of dust left on the floor, and she would finally rise with a snort of disgust and sweep the dust under the refrigerator.

Her sweeping finished, she looked at the wall clock. "Ten-forty," she said. "Good. See, it goes faster than you think. You got to keep busy." She remembered her sister's saying that to her. Maybe she ought to visit Ida today. Anyway, she ought to go out. She put away the broom and pan and went to look out of the window.

"Ai," she said softly, "such a morning." The sun was high and hot, dazzling her with its reflection off thousands of windows. She turned and walked slowly into the living room. It was a big room, lined on three sides by Morris's bookcases. Mrs. Klapper had had it refurnished a month ago and was sorry about it now. The new chairs and the new sofa were plump, springy, and ungiving. They could not be pounded or worn into comfort. As soon as the momentary brightness they had brought into the house was gone, she had wanted the old ones back.

"So what do I do today?" She leaned against a bookcase and ran her hands idly over Morris's books. They were always "Morris's books." Mrs. Klapper did not read much, nor had Morris, after a few teasing attempts in the first years of their marriage, ever made any serious efforts to get her to read. She had liked to be read to, but she always fell asleep, and Morris had smiled, patted her affectionately, and played chess with himself.

"I got to go shopping." She counted on her fingers. "Let's see—I got to go by Wireman's and get a loaf of bread, and some milk, and baking powder maybe—" She frowned. There must be something else. Wireman's was just two blocks away.

"If I go to Ida's I go past the butcher near the subway, and I could stop in and get maybe a pound chopped meat and a couple lamb chops." She *would* go to see Ida, then. "My own sister, you'd think I'd say hello once in a while. We're like strangers." Ida, the older of Mrs. Klapper's two sisters, had never married, and Mrs. Klapper had never felt right about bringing Morris over for supper. During the twenty-two years of her marriage she had snatched an awkward, silent lunch with her sister no more than twice a year.

Always, she remembered, always the look in the back of her eyes. I talk to her, I make jokes so she laughs and says, "Ai, Gertrude, everything changes but you"—and always, in back of the laughter: *This one also has a man, and I got nobody.* A look like that, you choke on your celery. What can you say?

Now, she thought, it might be all right to go to Ida.

The living room had always been Morris's domain, just as the bedroom had been hers. Each had intruded into the other's realm with something of the arrogance and curiosity of king visiting king. Morris was dead, but the room was still loyal to him, and the stranger pictures on the walls stared at her with the hatred of the conquered. She left the room quickly and went to the closet to get a light coat.

So I'll go see Ida, she thought, rummaging in her purse to make sure she had enough money, and we'll have lunch and talk about things and maybe take a walk in the park, and then I'll say, "Look, Ida, I got all this food; I got a whole pound chopped meat and nobody but me to eat it. Come on home with me and we'll make hamburgers and schmooze like we used to."

The idea pleased her. She won't go till late, she thought. That well I know Ida.

At the door she paused and muttered, "*Sei gesund*, Morris." She had never been able to break herself of the habit of saying "Be well" to her husband before she left the house, nor did she really want to; but she whisked the door shut behind her as she always did to keep herself from waiting for the soft "*Geh gesund*" from the living room.

Outside the air was warm and dry, and she breathed it with real pleasure as she walked slowly toward the grocery. Early summer in New York is at its most beautiful in the mornings, but few people ever notice it. The children go away to summer camps, and their parents' two weeks off usually come in late July or early August, when the days are sticky with boredom. Only old people know these early summer mornings, old people and the men who sell ice cream in public parks. They know these mornings well and love them desperately because they cannot last—these people who know that nothing lasts. The vendor buys an ice-cream cup from himself and sits down on the grass to eat it, or at least he thinks about doing it. The policeman sings to himself and stops to talk with the candy-store man, who has come out to get a little air before the wind becomes hot and sour. They talk about going swimming or going to the ball game, but it is enough for them to be there on the street corner talking to each other about it. And the old women move their chairs to follow the sun and do not speak to each other at all. They will in the afternoon, but that will be a different season, a different world. Now, in the morning, they stare across the street and do not blink when the cars go by.

Mrs. Klapper knew some of these women, but she did not nod to them as she passed the line of folding chairs. In a vague sort of way, she had always felt a certain contempt for them. She thought of them as *yentas*. Some of them aren't any older than me, she thought, and they sit there like stones and don't knit or read the papers or anything. What kind of way is that to live? You got to keep busy, keep moving, visit people. She walked faster, pleased with her decision to see Ida, and turned into Wireman's Dairy Grocery.

Wireman was behind the counter, a small pear-shaped man in a gray sweater and brown slacks. His eyes were black and sleepy, and he kept them fixed directly on whomever he was talking to. The skin on both sides of his wide face was slack and sagging, giving the effect not so much of jowls as of a face relaxing and crumpling like a robe thrown carelessly into a corner. He had been established on the corner before Mrs. Klapper and Morris had moved into the neighborhood, and she could not remember him as looking any different then or as changing notably during the twenty-two years. His wife, his children, his store had all grown, aged, and expanded during the time, but Wireman remained Wireman. She always wondered how she looked to him.

"So," he said when she came in. "So how are you today?"

"Just fine," Mrs. Klapper said. "How's your wife?" She nodded to his daughter, Sarah, who was sitting on an empty milk-bottle crate, reading a magazine.

"Who can complain?" Wireman shrugged. "She's on her feet, she eats. More you shouldn't ask from God."

"You hear from Sam lately?" Wireman's son had married six months before and moved to the West Coast.

Wireman looked quickly over his shoulder into the back of the store. When he turned back to her his face had gone dead. "No. What can I do for you?"

"A loaf rye bread," Mrs. Klapper said; "should be seedless. Also two bottles milk and a can of baking powder."

As Wireman turned to go to the back of the store, where his refrigerator was, Mrs. Klapper suddenly became freezingly aware of the way he walked. His shoulders were humped under the gray sweater, and he walked with small steps, one foot sliding ahead of the other and the other foot hurrying to catch up. His hands made very small pawing motions at his sides, and he looked as if over the years the air in which he moved had gradually changed to water.

"So old," Mrs. Klapper said aloud, and then realized that Sarah must have heard her. She looked guiltily at her; the girl nodded and kept reading her magazine.

"So, Sarah," she said because she could not bear the silence. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," said Sarah. How old was she—eighteen, nineteen? She was fat for her age, pimpled, and, Mrs. Klapper had always suspected, the brightest in the family.

"When you getting married already?" she asked loudly and was completely disgusted with herself when she saw the anger in Sarah's eyes. What do you care? she demanded of herself. Why is everybody around here so interested when everybody's getting married?

Sarah Wireman smiled determinedly. "Not right away, Mrs. Klapper." Her voice was completely without inflection, and Mrs. Klapper knew that she had given the same answer to a great many other old women while her father was getting their orders. She didn't want Sarah to lump her with those women, but she knew she had a long time ago, and she kept talking, thinking that there must surely be a sentence to remedy the situation.

"Well, you'll pretty soon be an aunt," she announced, thinking, Klapper, shut up! Just keep the mouth shut, please.

The girl's smile was as straight and thin as a dagger. "I sure hope so, Mrs. Klapper."

Shut up, shut up, Klapper! What are you becoming? She turned away from Sarah and stared hard at the Wheaties, Kix, and corn-flakes packages that lined one wall of the store. She could hear the girl's soft sigh of relief, and she herself sighed as if she had just gotten off an elevator in which she and a stranger had carefully not looked at each other. Then Wireman was shuffling in with her bread and milk and baking powder, putting them on the counter, and adding up her bill, mumbling the sums to himself as he wrote out the total. "You want I should charge you?"

"Yes," Mrs. Klapper answered. Wireman put the order in a brown paper bag and stuffed the bill in after it. She took the bag and started for the door.

"Tell your wife I said hello." She closed the door behind her, cutting off Wireman's short reply.

Having decided to visit Ida, she hoisted her bag into the crook of her left arm and set off down the block. The sun restored her good humor, and in two blocks' walking she had almost forgotten the weary politeness in Sarah Wireman's voice.

A figure was coming up the street toward her, but it took her a while to identify it because she was looking into the sun. When she finally recognized Lena Wireman she winced. *Vey*, she thought, now comes the heavy artillery. Maybe if she hoisted her shopping bag up in front of her face, Mrs. Wireman might not recognize her. But she had no real hope for this; she was one of the few women in the neighborhood who bothered to speak to Mrs. Wireman, and Mrs. Wireman knew her own.

She was a thin woman who had once been fat. Skin hung loosely on her forearms, between her knuckles, and around her elbows. The flesh was orange-white and seemed almost transparent. She always wore flat-heeled white shoes, having admired them on nurses, and tied her hair on top of her head in a knot about the size and shape of a prune. Once she had worked in the store with her husband, but for the last ten or twelve years she had sat in a metal-and-cloth chair in front of the store when it was warm, or on a milk-bottle crate inside the store when it rained. She never went across the street to sit with the old women in their folding chairs, and she always arranged her own chair so that she sat with her back to them.

"Hello," she called to Mrs. Klapper when they were twenty yards apart.

Mrs. Klapper lowered her shopping bag. My God, what eyes. She sighed, preparing herself for at least a ten-minute harangue. Be polite, Klapper. Somebody's polite to you and you're polite to somebody else and so the world goes around. She arranged her face in a wide smile of welcome.

"Lena!" she exclaimed. "How are you? You look wonderful!"

Mrs. Wireman shrugged and said, "Ahh," which meant that she was resigned in the face of chaos. "All right. How are you doing?"

"Ah, so-so. I just came by your husband's."

Mrs. Wireman's eyes were the very pale gray of an old egg; they were large eyes with wide rings of white, and she narrowed them now to look up at Mrs. Klapper. "How come you don't come around so much no more?"

"What are you talking about? I do come around." With her free hand Mrs. Klapper pointed at the package. "I got to eat too, like everybody."

The grocer's wife shook her head firmly. "I remember every two days, regular, I say to Avrom, 'Get the milk and eggs ready now so, comes Gertrude Klapper, you shouldn't keep her waiting.' Now all of a sudden, two days, three days, four days, no Gertrude Klapper. What are you, a stranger? You saving your money?" She looked accusingly at the younger woman. "You buying someplace else?"

No friend like an old friend, Mrs. Klapper thought wryly. Aloud she said, "Lena, twenty years I been buying at your place, I should change now? What is it with you? I got food in the house, I don't come in for a couple of days, suddenly it's by you a run on the bank." She spread her feet a bit and settled her weight; she'd be here a while yet. "Remember, I'm just buying for me now, I don't eat for two people, Lena."

Mrs. Wireman lowered her eyes. "All right, forgive me, I forgot about Morris. Excuse me."

"That's all right," Mrs. Klapper said. "It's over a year already."

To herself she said, Morris, forgive me that I should even think of forgetting you, but I am not going to talk about you to this one.

"So when you going away, Gertrude?" Mrs. Wireman was looking at her again.

"Going away?" Mrs. Klapper blinked in real bewilderment. "Lena, what is this? Who's going away?"

"Every day I say to Avrom, 'Gertrude is all by herself now, so why is she putting her money in the bank? Why doesn't she take a trip somewhere, go maybe to Florida? She's got a little money, she should use it now, go somewhere.' "

"Lena—" Mrs. Klapper began.

"I got a cousin"—Mrs. Wireman did not so much cut her off as run her down—"I got a cousin went to Florida, Miami Beach." She leaned closer to Mrs. Klapper. "She was there two weeks, *bang!*" She snapped her lean fingers. "Married like that. A rich man, too."

Well, you asked for it, Gertrude, Mrs. Klapper told herself. Next time, maybe you'll lay off Sarah. She took a deep breath. "Lena, I am not going anywhere, Florida or anywhere."

Mrs. Wireman squinted her eyes even more. "What are you saving up for, a big house with nobody in it? Better you should take a trip, have a good time."

"Lena, I don't want to go anywhere. I live here, I cook, I keep the house neat, I go for walks, I got you to talk to." God forgive you, Klapper! "Why should I go somewhere where I don't know anybody? Don't be in such a hurry to go rushing me off to Florida. I like it here."

"Look, look, how angry she gets!" Mrs. Wireman smiled, exposing long, wide teeth. "So who's rushing you? Just say a hello to your old friends once in a while."

Mrs. Klapper sighed. "I tell you, I'll drop in, a day or two, and we can sit and talk." She thought of a way to change the subject. "You can tell me about Sam, how he's doing."

The thin, orange and white face hardened into an expression of disgust. "About Sam and the bitch he married, I'll tell you nothing. Anything else we talk about. Not Sam."

"She looked like a nice girl, Eleanor." Mrs. Klapper remembered Sam's wife as a tall, pleasant-faced woman who had tried to help out in the store before she and Sam were married.

"A bitch," Mrs. Wireman said flatly. "Strictly no good, believe me." She looked at Mrs. Klapper as if daring her to say something in Eleanor's defense.

"I got to go, Lena," Mrs. Klapper said finally. "I got some more shopping to do." She began to edge around Mrs. Wireman, who made no move to let her pass. "Look, I'll come over soon, and we'll sit outside and schmooze a little, okay?"

"All right," Mrs. Wireman answered. "But you think about what I said, about Miami Beach."

Mrs. Klapper was safely past her. "I will, Lena. Take care of yourself."

"*Sei gesund,*" Mrs. Wireman said, turning to go.

"To your pretty daughter," Mrs. Klapper called after her, "say a hello for me."

Mrs. Wireman did smile then.

"Ya," Mrs. Wireman said, and went up the street. She walked faster than her husband, but her shoulders were hunched and crooked.

Mrs. Klapper stood in the middle of the sidewalk and watched her until she was gone. Then she half turned to go on down the block, stopped, and began to walk back the way she had come. She walked very slowly, taking small steps.

She could hear little Schwartz, who drove a fruit truck, crying his wares in the distance. His voice was high and musical, but he was too far away for her to make out the words. A woman she knew smiled as she passed and said, "Hello, Gertrude." Mrs. Klapper nodded and hurried past, not wanting to stop and talk.

To laugh at the Wiremans, she thought, this is easy. Lena is stupid, she knows from nothing, she's fun to talk to like a flounder. Wireman knows nothing but the store. His feet are flat from standing up all these years; sitting down he's forgotten. To both of them, money is God on earth. Sarah—she did not want to be hard on her—all right, so Sarah is smart. What good does it do her? In such a family, to be born smart is a curse. Better she should never have learned to read. She sighed. But I feel for them. Do me something. I feel for them. Am I so smart I should laugh at Lena? Am I so popular I should sit with the old women and say, "Lena Wireman sits by herself, good. Just so she don't sit with us"? Who are they? Her husband runs a store, he sells things to people. Are they so useful? Am I?

Mrs. Klapper was not an introspective woman, or, usually, a very analytical one. Thinking about Lena Wireman irritated her, and she walked quickly when she passed the grocery again, having no desire for a return match. She saw Sarah through the window for a second and wondered if she had seen her go by.

Some other time I'll go over to Ida's, she decided. Today I don't feel like walking. The baking-powder tin, atop the loaf of bread, caught her eye, and she tried to remember why she had bought it. I could bake a cake, maybe, and then call up Ida and say, "Look, come on over, we'll get fat together. Who can eat a whole cake?" She nodded. First she would bake the cake, then call Ida.

Passing the line of chairs—Morris had once called them "Murderers' Row"—she recognized old acquaintances. Sitting, as always, under the green awning of the corner candy store, which spot was hers owing to both seniority and squatter's rights, was a tiny gray-haired woman named Lapin. She had been old when Mrs. Klapper had moved into the neighborhood, and guesses as to her exact age ranged between eighty and one hundred. She was a dried-up comma of a woman, but Mrs. Klapper liked her and had found her good company.

"Hey, Lapin," she called loudly, Lapin's first name was Bella, but nobody ever used it. "Lapin, look up, say a hello."

Lapin looked up slowly from her omnipresent knitting needles and hank of black yarn. "Hello, Gertrude," she said in a surprisingly deep voice. "So how are you?"

"Managing. You look fine, Lapin."

The old woman tapped her chest. "I got a rattle in here two days now, and in my stomach it's all the time growling. Sit down already."

Mrs. Klapper shook her head. She had time, but the idea of taking even a temporary place in the row of chairs always frightened her. "I got to go in a minute, Lapin. Eat a little, so your stomach won't growl so much."

Lapin shook her head. "I been talking to the rabbi. He says at my age I got to be prepared. Why should I stuff myself? Any day—*boom!*" She smiled at Mrs. Klapper. "Any day."

"God forbid," Mrs. Klapper said. "You will outlive me and the rest of the buzzards. The rabbi too."

"Any day." Lapin's voice sounded a little petulant. She beckoned Mrs. Klapper close with a long-nailed forefinger. "But I'm ready, believe me. When I die the House of Sages will say Kaddish, regular like Rosh Hashonah."

Mrs. Klapper knew what question was expected of her. "So what about your nephew? Better the family should say Kaddish."

Lapin's mouth twisted, and she wrinkled her nose. "Kaddish they don't believe in, my nephews. For their children they wouldn't say it." Her face relaxed again. "For me the House of Sages will say Kaddish."

For at least thirty years, Mrs. Klapper knew, Lapin had lived off the sums her three nephews sent her every month. She needed very little to live, and so she kept a steady current of five-dollar bills flowing into the House of Sages. Once or twice Morris had been prevailed upon to send ten dollars in her name, and Mrs. Klapper had done so more often than she had let Lapin know.

"The House of Sages will give me a good funeral," Lapin said contentedly.

"Lapin," Mrs. Klapper said, "I only got a few minutes. Talk about something else, please."

The old woman went on, her eyes closed. "I will be buried in my robes." She had fallen into Yiddish. "And there will be some earth from Israel in the coffin."

"Why is it with you always funerals?" Mrs. Klapper asked a little nervously. Lapin kept on in Yiddish, her voice low and droning.

"And I will live in a beautiful house of my own. I will live forever. I will live in God—"

"So?" Mrs. Klapper's voice was harsh and querulous. "So how many floors will there be in this house, Lapin? And who will be the landlord?"

Lapin seemed to withdraw into her shawl. "Don't make fun. I don't care how many floors."

Mrs. Klapper regretted her words. "I'm sorry, Lapin. So have a beautiful funeral, live in a beautiful house. You got it coming."

The black eyes stared at her, and Lapin pointed the long forefinger. "*You* come to the funeral."

"Me?" Mrs. Klapper recovered quickly. "All right, Lapin. I'll come."

"Tell my nephews I said they should give you a ride to the cemetery." Lapin was staring absently down the street. "The rabbi will tell everybody how holy I was."

"Sure, Lapin. I got to go now. Take care." Mrs. Klapper had almost turned the corner when she heard the old woman call, "Gertrude!"

She turned and walked back to Lapin's chair. "So?"

"I was thinking," Lapin said slowly. "The funeral."

Mrs. Klapper waited, but Lapin said nothing. "What were you thinking, Lapin?"

"For you it's all right." Lapin turned her head stiffly to look up at Mrs. Klapper. "You come to the funeral, you say good-by, Lapin, you cry, you go home. You go home and have supper." She kept knitting her black yarn. "Me, I got to stay there. You'll all go home and have supper and leave me there."

Mrs. Klapper muttered something, patted a bony shoulder, and fled.

She almost ran the rest of the way home, stopping only in the lobby to catch her breath before she rang for the elevator. A straight-backed bench stood near the elevator door; she sank into it as if it were a hot bath. Her breathing became slower and shallower, and she gradually unclenched her hands that clung together in her lap. "Hoo-boy!" she said aloud. "What a morning!" The elevator arrived, and she stepped into it.

Lapin's predictions of and plans for her own death were nothing new to Mrs. Klapper. They were issued on a regular basis, like weather forecasts and stock-market reports. Morris had laughed at them, referred to them as "the ghetto preoccupation with a superghetto," but Mrs. Klapper had been brought up in a house and a neighborhood where even the mention of death was warded off with a "God forbid." A certain pride was to be taken in the knowledge that your children or your relatives would see that you were buried properly and with all honor, but Mrs. Klapper felt that Lapin was overdoing it a little.

Still, she reflected, entering her apartment, what else has Lapin got to talk about? Her nephews throw dice, the loser should go visit her; the rabbi comes over to tell her the House of Sages will give her a good funeral; what else can she talk about? At least it's not gossiping all day long like the others. She kept seeing the long row of chairs and the old women leaning to one another like bushes in the wind.

Don't worry, Klapper. She hung up her coat and walked slowly into the kitchen. For you there is also a seat waiting in Murderers' Row. Drop in any time. She put the milk in the refrigerator and wandered into the living room.

"So now what?" She looked defiantly at the books and paintings. "It is now twelve o'clock and I'm back where I was at eleven. Any suggestions?" But the living room belonged to Morris. It had no intention of suggesting anything.

Mrs. Klapper had, as a child, woven sturdy legs and a lot of curiosity into a real talent for getting lost. Even as an adult she was perfectly capable of getting lost in Brooklyn or Queens. If there was one emotion she could recall in totality it was the feeling of standing on a strange street under a five-o'clock sky, making tentative, trotting casts in one direction after another, knowing that each was the wrong one. She had always been afraid to ask people, for they looked gray and thick-fleshed, not at all like the people of the Bronx, and they went by without looking at her, except the children, who knew she was lost and delighted in it. There were no familiar subways, and the buses were colored differently and had strange numbers. So she might remain, as balanced between forces as the hub of a wheel, for half an hour or an hour before she called home and her father—later on, Morris—came and got her. So she remained in the living room, her hands at her sides, seeking a reason to move from the dark square of rug on which she stood.

She thought again of Jonathan Rebeck and wondered if he had found his watch. A watch is a small thing, she thought. You could look for days. Remembering that she had planned to call Ida, she went to the telephone, lifted the receiver, and slowly replaced it in its cradle.

So I call Ida and I say, "Ida, come over because I'm an old woman and I don't know what to do with myself." She watched the second hand sliding around the face of the kitchen clock. What do you do tomorrow, Klapper? Better start counting your relatives.

As she turned from the telephone, her glance fell on the small framed photograph of Morris she had kept hanging in the foyer. She stared at it, remembering the long jaw and the high, prominent cheekbones, the cattail eyebrows and the wisps of hair that clung to his head as scraps of meat do to a gnawed bone. Morris had been fifty-nine when he died, but his face was strikingly smooth and unlined, as if wind and water had rolled over him for thousands of years, whittling and polishing his face, eroding away the scars of human anger; not so much a face at peace as a face from which the marks of war had been worn away.

I could go down to the cemetery, Mrs. Klapper thought, and maybe keep Morris company a little. She toyed with the telephone dial but did not lift the receiver again. I got no place else to go. A few more days like this, I'll go looking for Lena Wireman, we'll sit down on boxes and talk about how lousy people are. This I don't need.

She headed for her closet. Besides, it's quiet, and I could maybe think about what I should do for the next thirty years.

After a long deliberation, she chose her new light wool coat and went into her bedroom to look at herself in the mirror.

"Hmmmm," she murmured in admiration. "Beautiful, Klapper. Like a young bride. Only—" She took off the coat and went back to the closet. "Only a young bride would not be going out to a cemetery. Act your age, Klapper."

A little regretfully, she put on a dark spring coat and went to the mirror again. "*Nu*, it'll do. To a cemetery you don't wear a trousseau." She smiled at the mirror and sighed. "Be a little honest with yourself, Klapper. With Morris also."

She turned off the light and went from room to room, making sure that all the lights and gas jets were off and that all the faucets were shut. Finally she stood in the hall with the door open and looked back at the darkened apartment.

"Morris," she said softly, "I feel a little bit guilty because I'm not sure if it's just you I'm coming to see." She hesitated. "Morris, I would bring you something. I would do something for you, only I can't think of anything you need."

Mrs. Klapper closed the door behind her and walked to the elevator.

VI

THE RAVEN was tired of flying. He had been all over the Bronx that morning, trying to find a restaurant that sold ready-made sandwiches. All the cafeterias were jammed with the lunch-hour crowd, and the Automat represented a problem in logistics that the raven had never quite solved. Finally he twitched a roast-beef sandwich out of the hands of a telephone linesman before his victim had even unwrapped the waxed paper. The telephone linesman was not a philosopher. He threw a rock at the raven. The rock missed—the raven had a sense for these things—and clipped a policeman above the kidneys. The policeman was also not a philosopher.

But it was a long flight out to the Yorkchester Cemetery, and the raven's wings ached. He found himself struggling to keep from losing altitude, and the roast-beef sandwich was getting heavier with every flap of his tired wings. He flew under the Broadway El, and this was a terrible blow to his pride. The raven held trains in deep contempt and usually went out of his way to fly high above them, matching their speed as long as he could, shrieking insults after them for as long as he could see them. When he was much younger he had loved to chase the Lexington Avenue Express underground at 161st Street and scream what he thought of a worm that fled into the earth without the slightest gesture of defiance, for all it was a glandular monstrosity.

His adolescence ended abruptly on the day when he flew down the tunnel in pursuit of a great worm that shrieked with terror. Even now, winters and moltings later, he refused to talk about it.

Flying wearily over the cemetery gates, he caught sight of a small pickup truck a little ahead of him. He recognized it; the cemetery's caretakers used it to travel back and forth from the distant corners of the cemetery to the main office by the gates. It was rolling along the paved path at an easy twenty miles per hour; and, looking at it, the raven fought against a sudden impulse to hitch a ride.

He had never done such a thing before. Because he was too arrogant to walk, too heavy for telephone wires, and too unpopular for bird sanctuaries, an amazingly large portion of his life had been spent in the air. He felt no particular pride in having been born a bird, and he subscribed to no avian code of ethics, but he had never seen a bird make use of human transportation, and pioneers made him nervous.

The decision had to be made quickly. His wings felt like flatirons, and the truck was pulling farther and farther ahead. The raven glanced quickly around, saw nobody, hesitated, felt oddly guilty, said, "Ah, screw it," raised one last small chinook of flapping, and fell, gasping, into the back of the truck.

He lay on his side for a few minutes, content simply to breathe and feel the ache slowly go from his folded wings. Then he stood up carefully and looked over the tailgate at the road spinning away behind the truck. He had no way of appreciating the truck's exact speed, but he knew that it was far faster than his normal cruising pace, and he laughed in the sun at his own epochal cleverness.

"By God," he said aloud, "this is the way to travel. Damned if I ever fly another stroke." He turned, hopped up on the front rim of the truck body, and craned his neck to see through the narrow glass slit at the back of the cab.

There were two men in the cab. One was a huge dark man named Campos, who slouched on the seat with his feet stretched out in front of him, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes half closed. The driver was a medium sort of man named Walters, who had a cold and kept taking one hand off the wheel to wipe his nose on his sleeve. He talked incessantly, frequently glancing eagerly at the silent Campos to see if he was paying attention. Campos's cap was pulled down over his eyes, with the visor nearly resting on the bridge of his nose, and he seemed sound asleep.

"A real good guy," Walters was saying, "and a hell of a driver, but not very bright. He used to drive for some perfume company up around Poughkeepsie, and he was always picking up guys. Hitchhikers, you know. Anybody he saw walking along the road, he'd stop and pick them up. Anybody at all. He used to come rolling into Poughkeepsie with eight or nine guys on board. They'd sit in back with their legs hanging out, or up front with him. It looked like they'd all get together and chartered him. So finally— You listening, Campos?"

Campos remained immobile, but the brim of his cap quivered.

"So anyway," Walters went on, reassured, "one day he picks up these two tough kids in Fishkill, and they beat the hell out of him, dumped him off, and stole the truck. Kind of spoiled his outlook."

He grinned at Campos. "He wouldn't pick up nobody, from that day to this." Campos did not move. Walters sighed loudly. "You try to be a good guy," he said, looking straight ahead, "but they get you sooner or later."

Campos gave a small noncommittal grunt. Walters nodded. "Sooner or later, boy." He looked out the window, took a deep breath, and sneezed. "Beautiful day. Beautiful goddam day."

The truck jounced over an unpaved section of road, and Campos slipped even lower on the seat. Walters looked at him a little nervously. "Someday you're gonna break your ass doing that." Campos grunted again.

"All right," Walters said. "I don't give a damn." He sneezed again and drove in silence for a few minutes. Then he turned hopefully to Campos again and asked, "You catch the game last night?"

He was off before Campos had even shaken his head. "They lost, five to four. Cepeda hit two, but Kirkland struck out with two on in the ninth." He spat out of the window. "The bastards gave them the game, anyway. They made four errors. Wagner dropped a fly ball and Spencer threw one into left field. . . ."

He described the game with the sad relish of the messenger to Job, blinking his pale eyes rapidly as he talked. Beside him, Campos slumped in his seat and grunted and nodded now and then, and he might have been nodding to Walters or to something else.

Walters sniffed, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and began to sing Perry Como's latest. He chanted the song as if he weren't sure of the tune, and he appeared startled when Campos stirred beside him, sat up a little, and said, "You got it wrong."

"Better'n any goddam Puerto Rican," Walters said delightedly.

"Cuban, you bastard," said the big man without rancor. He slipped down in his seat again and looked out of the window.

In the back of the truck the raven had been joined by a small red squirrel who had dropped out of an overhanging tree as the truck passed under it. The squirrel was thin, with large bright eyes, and he sat on one of the chains that held the tailgate shut and demanded, "What on earth are you doing?"

"Making a good-will tour," said the raven, who disliked squirrels even more than pigeons. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

The squirrel drew his front paws close against his furry chest. "But you're a bird!" he said in amazement. "Why aren't you flying?"

"I've retired," said the raven calmly.

The truck took an exceedingly tight curve, and the squirrel nearly lost his balance on the chain. He recovered himself with a small squeak of alarm and stared at the raven. "Birds are supposed to fly," he said a little querulously. "Do you mean you're never going to fly again?"

It had come very gradually to the raven's attention that the motion of a truck on a gravel road is quite different from flight. There was a faint murmur of discontent from his stomach, distant as heat lightning still. "Never," he said grandly. "From here on in, I'm a pedestrian."

The truck hit two ruts in succession, and the raven lay down quietly and glared at the squirrel, who had balanced himself twice with a graceful flick of his tail.

"Personally," the squirrel continued, "I don't know that I'd care to fly. Unnatural method of locomotion, after all. Tiring, dangerous, exposed to all manner of injuries. Oh, I can see your point in wanting to get out of the business. But, after all, it's what you were born for. Just as I was born to be a squirrel. Fish got to swim and birds got to fly. God made them, high and lowly, and ordered their estate." He coughed apologetically. "Those last two lines weren't mine, I'm afraid."

"You could have fooled me," said the raven.

"All lives are composed of two basic elements," the squirrel said, "purpose and poetry. By being ourselves, squirrel and raven, we fulfill the first requirement, you in flight and I in my tree. But there is poetry in the meanest of lives, and if we leave it unsought we leave ourselves unrealized. A life without food, without shelter, without love, a life lived in the rain—this is nothing beside a life without poetry."

The raven lifted his head from the floor of the truck. "If I was a hawk, I'd eat you in two bites," he said weakly.

"Certainly," agreed the squirrel promptly. "And if you were a hawk it would be your duty to eat me. That is the purpose of hawks, to eat squirrels, and I may add, gophers. But if you ate me without any appreciation of your own swift-plummeting stroke and without a certain tender understanding of my mad,

Golden Sierra
High School Library

futile flight toward my tree, where my wife and family dwell—well, you wouldn't be very much of a hawk, that's all I can say."

He drew himself erect on the tailgate, as if he were facing a firing squad, having just rejected blindfold and cigarette.

"It's people like you who make things tough for the noncombatants," said the raven bitterly. He got up and walked to the back of the truck to look over the tailgate. The truck was approaching the ungardened path that led to the Wilder mausoleum. Remembering the roast-beef sandwich, he went back and picked it up rather awkwardly in his beak.

"Are you getting off here?" the squirrel asked. The raven nodded.

"Well, it's been very interesting talking to you," the squirrel said earnestly. "Do drop in if you're ever in the neighborhood. We have little get-togethers every Saturday night. If you're ever free some night—"

But the raven was gone, flapping heavily on stiff wings down the narrow path to the mausoleum. Turning his head, he saw the truck careening on its way. As soon as it was out of sight, he dropped to the ground and began to walk determinedly along the path.

I didn't want to walk, he thought, with that furry little bastard yapping at me. Squirrels get so damn enthusiastic about things.

The gravel skidded under his feet, providing very little for his claws to grasp and making his legs ache. The casually dashing feeling he had enjoyed on the truck before the motion began to affect his stomach was gone, and in its place came a mental picture of a somewhat carsick black bird stumbling along a slippery road that hurt his feet. It was an utterly undignified image, and the raven winced and put it from his mind. The raven believed, grudgingly and inarticulately, in dignity.

But he kept walking. Once he looked up and saw a swallow coasting down the sky. His wings jerked involuntarily, tugging like children at his body, but he did not take off. He walked on the gravel road and thought about the squirrel.

Goddam organizers, he thought. You get something good going, and somebody comes along and organizes it. He told himself that this was inevitable, the way of the world, but it bothered him. The raven would have been in favor of a movement in the general direction of chaos, consternation, and disorganization, had he not known that such a project would require the most organization of all. Besides, there would undoubtedly be a squirrel running it.

"Saturday-night get-togethers," he muttered into the roast-beef sandwich as he limped along. "Tiny little hot dogs with toothpicks through them. Crap." His feet hurt quite a bit, and the sandwich was getting heavy again.

Michael Morgan made no sound on the gravel, and when he said, "Good day, bird," the raven dropped the sandwich and sprang almost four feet straight up. He turned in the air so that he was facing Michael as he came down and he was cursing even before he hit the ground. "What a thing to do!" he cried furiously. "What a sonofabitching thing to do!" Michael slapped his thighs soundlessly, and from his throat came surfs of laughter as silent as lightning.

"I didn't know you'd take it that way." He gasped, putting out his hand to silence the angry bird. "Really I didn't. I'm sorry. I apologize." He looked closely at the dusty raven. "What makes you so touchy today?"

"I've had a tough morning," the raven said sullenly. He felt that he had acted foolishly. But he hated to be caught off guard.

"You dropped something," Michael said, pointing at the sandwich with a transparent foot. "And why in God's name are you walking?"

"I had a flat."

"Tell me why you're walking. I'm curious."

"Mind your own goddam business," the raven answered, but he said it absently and he did not seem to be thinking of Michael.

"Do you know what I think?" Michael folded his arms and grinned. "I think you've forgotten how to fly."

The raven looked at him in amazement. "I've what?"

"Of course," Michael went on cheerfully, "like playing the piano. You know—you play beautifully, you don't even need sheet music. Then you look down at your hands and think, How did I do that, how am I doing this, what am I to do next? And then everything goes bang. You forget how to move your fingers, how to pedal, even how the piece goes. That's what's happened to you, my friend. You've thought too much, and now you don't remember how to fly."

"Go haunt a house," the raven said. He picked up the roast-beef sandwich once more and began to walk on. Michael matched his pace, talking as he did so.

"It comes from being around ghosts too much, lad. Very bad for you. You start becoming one, by osmosis, as it were.

You start to forget things, the way they do. You move slowly, the way they do, because nothing in the world can rush you. Oh, you're well on the way, boy, forgetting how to fly. A few more days and you can join our chess club and have Mr. Rebeck push the pieces around for you."

The raven stopped walking and looked at Michael for a moment with something approaching pity. Then he put the sandwich on the ground and looked directly at Michael again.

"Watch me," he said. He took two quick steps and went into the air.

The wind dizzied him and made him a little drunk. He cleared a tree by a few inches, turned, and seemed to slide down an invisible tightwire to a smaller tree. Then he flew almost straight up for twenty or thirty feet. At the top of his climb he fell off on one wing and began to spiral gradually down like a sleepy leaf. He glided in small, angled circles without beating a wing until he was no higher than Michael's head. Then he made an ungraceful movement of his wings, seemed to skid a little, and was roosting in a tree off to the left, breathing hard, with his heart stuttering delightedly.

He shook his head slightly, winked maliciously at Michael, and rose from the branch with a jump that was very nearly a dance step. The air was as warm as wedding cake as he fell, volplaning directly at Michael's feet. Michael stepped back nervously, wondering if the ground would cleave before the strong beak like the Red Sea or if it wouldn't, and how the raven felt about the matter, if he gave a damn at all. And then there was a quick swirl in the gravel and pebbles scattering and a black feather on the ground, and the raven was circling overhead with the roast-beef sandwich in his beak.

The sandwich had had a pretty tiring morning itself, and as the raven circled triumphantly the worn wrapping tore, and the sandwich fell from the raven's beak, turning over and over. Michael raised his hands to catch it, and then lowered them and held them behind his back.

But the raven fell beside the sandwich, turning his head to judge its descent so that they looked like two meteors comforting each other. Then a branch broke the sandwich's fall for a moment; the raven struck and was gone, over the trees and down the path. Michael smiled with just the right touch of casual sadness and followed.

Laura saw the raven first from where she sat with Mr. Rebeck on the grass in front of the mausoleum. She had been sitting there when he had come out to stand on the steps and yawn. He had been inordinately pleased to see her and had gone back into the mausoleum to dress as fast as he could, because he felt somehow that she might be gone when he returned.

But she was there, sitting on the grass and looking curiously at the sun. He had not seen her since the time she had come with Michael, a week ago. June then, it was July now, a New York July, full of rust-colored mornings and shining noons that hurt the eyes. People came less often to the cemetery, and the roses went brown on the graves before they were replaced.

She had not come again, and he had wondered. Now he went over and sat down beside her.

"Hello, Laura," he said. "Where have you been?"

"Here and there." Laura moved her hand very slightly and was both here and there. Mr. Rebeck saw her so—sitting, with the sun shining through dress and bone and body, making her look like a pen-and-ink drawing; and walking among the olive-colored ferns that grew all around the cemetery, encircling it as cattails do a stagnant pond. She smiled at him now, and he saw her the night before, standing close to the snake-laced gate, smiling.

"I see," he said, and he did.

"I came to visit you," Laura said. "I came to sit and hear you talk to me."

"Delighted to have you. What should I talk about?"

"Something alive. The theater, or subway fares or labor unions, or books, or baseball, or foreign relations, or the going price of bananas. Talk to me, please, about anything at all, so long as it's alive."

Mr. Rebeck's brows consulted each other as he tried to think of a subject, but Laura interpreted the frown as an expression of puzzlement and went on, "Because I'm going to have to make a choice very soon, and I want to be sure it's the right one."

She paused, and her hands moved in her lap like captured butterflies. "Death has been very good to me," she said finally. "Do you know what I can do now?" Mr. Rebeck shook his head.

"I can think myself places. I can go back and forth across this cemetery seven times, from gate to gate, and be back here before you can snap your fingers. I can ride in the caretakers' truck, in a space barely big enough for two people, and hear the men talking. All I have to do is let my body drop from me as if it were a wet bathing suit, and then I'm me and I can go where I want to go."

"Except out of the cemetery," Mr. Rebeck said.

"How did you know?"

"It works that way for all ghosts. You can go anywhere, except away from the place where your body is buried. I suppose there's a reason for it."

"I thought it was just me," Laura said. "I thought perhaps you had to want to go back very badly before the gate would let you pass."

She looked past him, and he knew that she was staring at the lion-heads on the mausoleum door. "It doesn't matter. There's nothing I want to see. I like it better this way. Nobody can see me, you know. Not even you, unless I want you to. I've sat and watched you for hours"—Mr. Rebeck started—"and you read, and sometimes you have put your book down and looked at me and didn't know I was there. You were humming to yourself."

"I can see you now," Mr. Rebeck said.

"Sometimes I put my body back on. But not as often as I used to. It feels tight on me and makes me walk slowly. It always did. Someday, someday soon, I may just leave it and not come back."

"Where is the choice, then?"

Laura's hands stopped moving in her lap, and she looked away from Mr. Rebeck. "Because I might be wrong," she said softly, "and Michael might be a little bit right, even if he is a fool."

She turned back to Mr. Rebeck. "This is very much like the last minute before you fall asleep at night. You close your eyes and everything seems to be rushing away from you, and you're sinking backward and down—like a subway when you're in a local and an express goes by so fast that your train really appears to be going backward. You just let yourself fall with it, and it's easy and comfortable and quite wonderful. But you keep yourself awake until you make sure that everything's all right; that the lights are out and the door is locked, that you did everything you meant to do that day, that nothing's left unfinished.

"Well, I don't feel right. I keep thinking that I've left a door open somewhere." She put a hand out to touch his own, and Mr. Rebeck felt a cold breeze drying the July sweat on the back of his hand before she moved away.

"Do you want me to talk about live things now?" he asked. "I've remembered something."

"Yes, please," said Laura. And Mr. Rebeck sat with his legs tucked under him and his eyes holding the delicate tracings of iris and pupil and eyelash that had been Laura's eyes, and he told her about a zoo he had visited more than twenty years before. He told Laura about a hippopotamus that would munch on the same tiny square of chocolate for almost an hour, rolling it around in its mouth with its eyes shut tight; and an immensely fat orangutan that sat sleeping in a puddle of its own flesh; and a monkey that tossed itself carelessly around the cage like a spool of red ribbon; about two white wolves; and about the people that had been at the zoo. He made them up for her; they weren't too good because it had been a long time, but Laura seemed satisfied. Suddenly she pointed over his shoulder and said, "The raven's coming—and Michael."

Mr. Rebeck turned his head and saw the raven in the sky and Michael coming slowly down the path, stepping on twigs and not breaking them.

The raven seemed reluctant to land, but he finally did, dropping a battered roast-beef sandwich into Mr. Rebeck's lap just before he touched the ground. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet, Mr. Rebeck thought, but his eyes glittered and he carried his head like the cocked hammer of a gun.

"All I could get," he said, gesturing at the sandwich with his beak.

"Just one?"

"Things are tough all over."

"I was joking." Mr. Rebeck unwrapped the torn waxed paper. "This will be fine." He pulled a strip of meat from the sandwich and offered it to the raven, who shook his head. "Uh-uh. Found a robin's nest this morning."

Mr. Rebeck ate the meat himself, but Laura made a small sound of horror. "You ate—" She could not finish.

The raven turned to look at her. "Morning," he said cheerfully. "Didn't notice you."

Laura remained still, but she seemed to have drawn miles away from the man and the bird. "You ate a robin's eggs—"

"Egg," said the raven. "More than one egg in the morning and I get the hiccups." He made a casual grab at a grasshopper, headed it off with his beak a couple of times, and then let it escape into the grass.

Laura's hands cupped around each other, as if she were shielding something blue and fragile. "But they're so pretty, and so harmless!"

"So?" The raven canted his head slightly to one side. "And a hen's Public Enemy Number One?"

"It's not the same thing. It's not the same thing at all."

"Damn right it isn't. Nobody ever says, 'Look, it's spring! I just saw the first hen.' You ever hear a song about when the red, red hen comes bob, bob, bobbing along? Hell, you give a smart bird like the buzzard half the publicity a robin gets, and he'd be the national bird inside of a year."

His voice dropped back to its normal range. "People root for the goddamnedest birds. You see a robin murdering a worm, and right away it's 'Hold the fort, redbreast! Help is on the way! Wait'll I find my old army rifle and we'll fight the monster off! You and me, bird! Shoulder to shoulder! To the death!' But you seen an owl having breakfast off a field mouse and you form a committee to march on Washington and make them pass a law saying from now on owls can only eat cabbage and apple pie.

"Take a worm now. All right, they aren't brilliant, but they work hard. Your average worm is a nice enough little guy, a kind of small businessman. He's quiet, he's good for the soil, he doesn't bother anybody, he leads a good, dull life—and the poor bastard is a three-to-one bet to wind up on the end of some kid's hook if the robins don't get him. And that's all right, because he's slimy and he can't sing either. But a kid shoots a robin with a slingshot and forty years later he writes in his autobiography how he didn't know the meaning of death till then. Or you take squirrels." His eyes brightened perceptibly. "The way I feel about shooting squirrels—"

"But you eat worms," Laura pointed out.

"Sure. But at least I don't call in the photographers."

Michael reached them then, and Mr. Rebeck was suddenly aware of the disparity between his walk and Laura's. Laura moved like a dandelion plume on a day wrinkled with small winds, barely touching the ground. When she did, it seemed accidental and meaningless, for she left no footprints even in the softest earth, and no pebbles sprang aside from her feet. Whether she stood on the ground, on a tree limb, or on a rose's smallest thorn, she was separate from the ground or the branch or the thorn.

Now Michael, Mr. Rebeck thought, Michael walks slowly because he is busy remembering how it felt to walk. He must build his road as he walks along, and it cannot be pleasant for him to realize that the road rolls itself up behind him with every step he takes. He steps hard, banging his feet against the ground, hoping to feel the pain that comes when you do that, as if you'd stepped on a lighted cigar. But there is no pain, and he leaves no footprint to tell where he has gone.

Aloud, he said, "Good morning, Michael."

"Hi," Michael said. He looked at Laura. "Hello, Laura."

"Hello." On seeing him approach, she had planned to add something like "Still fighting good fights?" But she also saw the way he walked and the desperate tangibility he strove for that made him look even more unreal, a shape superimposed upon the world, and she said nothing. What can life possibly have been to him, she wondered, that he clings to it so? She felt a bit jealous.

"Hey, Morgan."

Michael turned quickly to the raven. "Yes?"

"Knew I had something to tell you," the raven said. "They set your old lady's trial for August eighth."

Michael's heart might have skipped a beat here, or pounded like a drum, or raced like a mile runner, or done any of the other things so popular among hearts, except that Michael had no heart now, not even the most smudged carbon of one, nor ever would again.

"My—old lady?" he asked, slowly and quite foolishly.

"Sandra." It would have taken a stronger man than Mr. Rebeck to keep his mouth shut. "Your wife, Michael."

"I know who she is!" Michael shouted at him. He hadn't known he was angry until he answered, and he hadn't meant to shout so loudly. But they were all looking at him.

"I remember," he said. "What about her?"

"Saw a couple of papers," the raven said. "All over the front pages. She looks a little worried."

Michael was thinking about Sandra. He had not thought about her for nearly a week. That is, he had thought about her a good deal, but somewhat in the way one thinks about an aching tooth. It's there, of course, and the sound teeth ache with it in four-part harmony, but it can be lived with and taken as much for granted as all the other parts of daily life. The idea is to keep from touching it with your tongue. And, like the heart and the sphincter muscles, the tongue can be disciplined. It just takes will power and a lot of free time.

"I didn't even know she'd been arrested," he said to the raven.

"I'd have told you before, only I don't read the papers much, and then it's just the sports section. They indicted her right after they buried you, and it's probably been front-page stuff since."

Laura was looking from one to the other of them, frowning slightly. "I don't think I understand."

The raven favored her with a swift, golden-eyed glance. "Don't feel bad. Nobody does."

"But why is Michael's wife on trial?" Laura persisted. "What did she do?"

"Poisoned the hell out of me," Michael said briefly. He did not look at her. "I told you about it."

"No," Laura said. "No, you didn't."

"Of course I did. How do you think I got here—overeating? I told you, all right. You just forgot."

To the raven he went on, "Has she been in jail all this time?"

"Uh-huh. They don't allow bail for first-degree murder."

"Sandra in prison," Michael said tentatively. "Odd sound. Is she just going to plead guilty and get it over with?"

"Can't," said the raven. "Not for first-degree murder. She's got to plead not guilty or they won't play. They got rules, you know, like everybody else."

"Not guilty!" Michael stared at the bird. "Is that what she's going to tell the jury?"

The raven scratched at the earth restlessly. "I'm not her lawyer. I just read a couple of papers."

"Ah, she can't get away with that!" Michael was outraged now. "She poisoned me good and proper."

"Well, the cops think so," the raven said. "Most of the reporters too. I'll bring you a paper tomorrow. You got a real good press."

Michael did not seem to hear him. "What can she possibly claim? Accidental death? She'd never get away with it; they'd want to know where she got the poison and how it got into my drink."

"They found the poison in her dresser or someplace like that," the raven told him. "She says she doesn't know anything about it. Didn't buy it, didn't even know it was in the house."

"Life is full of surprises."

"You know it," agreed the raven. He worried an itching leg with his beak. "She's not gonna claim it was accident, though. Not by the papers."

"What then? An act of God?"

"No." The raven lunged at another grasshopper and batted it, stunned, to the ground. He took an unconscionable time devouring it, and Michael became impatient.

"What is it, then?"

The raven finished the grasshopper and said, "Suicide." Then he hunted through the grass for more insects, because grasshoppers are like peanuts. Nobody eats just one at a time.

VII

THEY WERE all looking at Michael. Mr. Rebeck, Laura, the raven—they were all looking at him. He felt as if he had told a joke and they had missed the punchline and were leaning to him, waiting for the kicker, the all-illuminating kicker that is found only in jokes; or as if someone had asked, "How you doing?" and the spring-and-strap arrangement in him that always answered that question for him had rusted and broken and he would never again be able to answer perfunctory questions the way other people did. He hoped that Mr. Rebeck would say something, and then he thought he had better speak to the raven before Mr. Rebeck did say something. So he shook his head slowly to show that he was amazed and more than amazed and he said to the raven, "She says I killed myself?"

"Uh-huh." The raven had found another grasshopper. "She says you had a nightcap together and you went to bed, and when she woke up, there you were."

Michael tried not to look at Laura. "That's crazy! Why should I have killed myself?"

"I'm not your mother," the raven said crossly. "Look, all I know is I read the papers. So here she is and they say did you? She says no. They say ho-*ho*. So she goes on trial August eighth." He turned to Mr. Rebeck. "I got to pull out, Anything you want me to take?"

Mr. Rebeck produced a half-pint milk container. "Thank you very much for the sandwich."

"Pleasure was mine," the raven said. "Also the flying around. See you." His wings began to beat.

"Wait a minute," Michael said. "Could you find out?"

"Find out what?"

"Don't act stupid," Michael said shortly. "About Sandra. What's happening in court. Could you keep an eye on the papers? I'd like to know how the trial's going."

"Guess so." The raven took off lightly, swung in a long ellipse, and came soaring back over their heads. Skidding on a thin breeze, he banked and banked again, trying to keep within earshot.

"I'll keep an eye out. Maybe bring back a paper, if I can get one."

"Thanks," Michael called. And then the raven was gone, flying at right angles to the wind. The milk container swung from his claws, and sometimes he did a sideslip for no reason that Mr. Rebeck could see. But his wings beat easily and strongly, carrying him higher than the trees.

Michael watched the raven for as long as he could see him, and did not turn even when the bird was out of sight. To his right, he knew, Mr. Rebeck sat and looked at him, with his chin on his fist and his eyes puzzled. He would ask no questions, Michael knew; he would be very polite and wait for Michael to open the subject. And if Michael didn't, he would talk about something else and never mention Sandra again. There might be strain and awkwardness between them for a while, but it would all come from Michael. He would be placed in the uncomfortable position of a man whose privacy is genuinely respected, and he hated Mr. Rebeck a little for it.

But behind him he could hear Laura's laughter rushing and tumbling in her throat long before it spilled into the space between them, and he spun on her as she laughed and said, "Something's funny?"

"Everything," Laura said happily. She laughed the way the few ghosts who remember how cry: quietly and incessantly, because there are no tears to dry up, no throats to ache, and no faces to be spoiled. There is nothing really to stop that kind of crying, that kind of laughter, and Michael thought that the slow force of it might bend him until he snapped.

"Stop it," he said angrily. "She has to plead something."

Laura kept laughing at him. He looked over at Mr. Rebeck. "She can't plead guilty—and she wouldn't if she could. They'd put her in jail for life."

Laura stopped laughing quite suddenly, and where her laughter had been there was the glossy silence that hangs in the air after a train has gone by. "And if they find her guilty now?" she asked.

But Michael was thinking of Sandra in prison, and he said nothing.

"They'd kill her," Laura said, "the way they do. It's quite a gamble, if she's guilty."

Michael still said nothing, and Mr. Rebeck stirred and got up. "Maybe she'd rather be dead," he said slowly. "She might not want to go to prison."

"Nobody does," Laura said impatiently. "But women don't just throw their lives away like that. Women are real gamblers. They only bet on sure things."

She looked again at Michael, who would not look at her. "Wouldn't it be funny," she said thoughtfully. "Here we've got Michael Morgan, running back and forth in his grave, stamping his feet, telling everybody he loved life so much that they had to amputate him from it. A murdered man, crying for justice. Everybody within the sound of his voice is suitably impressed." She laughed again. "Me, too. I thought he was a fool, but he howled so loudly and made so much fuss that I began to wonder. And now, after all—"

"Shut up!" Michael said. "Just shut up. You don't know what you're talking about."

"And after all," Laura went on, "it turns out that maybe he performed the operation himself. Well, fine. Hurray. Good for him. A consummation devoutly, and so on. You done good, boy."

"Sandra," Michael said huskily, "I mean Laura, shut up and leave me alone. I didn't kill myself. Before God, I didn't kill myself."

But Laura's voice skimmed on, not laughing now; even shaking a little, but clear and pitiless, and he could no more stop it than the strongest wire fence can stop the most casual breeze. "And now he's terribly embarrassed about the whole thing. He wants out. He figures if he shouts loud enough, maybe he'll wake himself up." She essayed to laugh again, but the quaver in her voice tripped it up. "God damn you, Michael, for a little while, maybe only a few minutes, you really had me going. You were a symbol of the indestructibility of life or something. A real Greek challenge to death. Man Against the Night. Wherever you go, darling, I'll be with you. Curtain. Everybody files out, uplifted, and the orchestra plays the big tango number from the second act." She sighed. "Oh, well, never mind, Michael. You just locked yourself out, that's all."

She got up and brushed her hands down the sides of her dress, although no grass clung to it. "Good-by, Mr. Rebeck. Thank you for talking to me. Good-by, Michael." She began to walk away, and sometimes her feet touched the ground and sometimes they didn't.

"Woman!" Michael's shout bounced, burst, and bloomed inside Mr. Rebeck's head and hurt a little. "Damn and blast it, I didn't kill myself! I had no intention of killing myself. I was too bloody arrogant for suicide. It would have been like murdering God or drawing mustaches all over the Sistine Chapel. Whey should I have killed myself? That's what she can't get around, that's what they'll get her on. We had a nightcap, we went to bed, and I woke up dead. That may be indigestion. It's not suicide."

Laura had stopped walking when he first shouted, but she did not turn. Michael made an abbreviated gesture of head-scratching and said suddenly, "Anyway, my grave is in church ground. I was a Catholic, you know. Not a very good one, but I never left the Church. I think I was too lazy. Would they have buried me here, in hallowed ground, if they thought I'd committed suicide?"

Then Laura did turn. "I don't know," she said slowly. "I hadn't thought of that."

Michael took a few steps toward her and stopped. "I didn't kill myself. I know that as well as you can know anything in this place, where all your thoughts crumble and go. It's just not the sort of thing I'd do."

"As the mother said when her son ran amuck and chopped up two old ladies, a bus driver, and the head of the fire department."

"No, not like that. Listen to me, Laura. When I was eighteen or twenty, I knew everything except what I wanted. I knew all about people, and poetry, and love, and music, and politics, and baseball, and history, and I played pretty good jazz piano. And then I went traveling, because I felt that I might have missed something and it would be a good idea to learn it before I got my master's degree."

He smiled a little at the silent Laura and turned slightly to get Mr. Rebeck in too. "And the older I grew, and the farther I traveled, the younger I grew and the less I knew. I could feel it happening to me. I could actually walk down a dirty street and feel all my wisdom slipping away from me, all the things I wrote term papers about. Until finally, before I lost everything, I said, 'All right, I'm sorry. I was young and I had a girl and I didn't know any better. It's not easy to stay properly ignorant. I apologize. Leave me a few things to know, just enough to get home on, and I'll be content with these and not bother anybody. I've learned my lesson. Maybe I'll write a book.'

"And then the little went too, and I found myself alone in the middle of the world, without a doubt the most stupid man that ever scratched his head. All the things I thought I knew about people, about myself, they were all gone. All I had left was a head full of confusion, and I wasn't even sure what I was confused about. Nothing stayed still. So I said, 'What the hell, I'm a fool,' and that seemed reasonable enough. So I went home and became a teacher."

"Because you couldn't do anything else?" Laura asked. "I've heard that before. I never really believed it."

"No, because I felt safe. It was nice being back in college. I knew about colleges. I figured that I'd stay for a while and teach and try to learn a few things. And when I was whole again, and wise, why then I'd be off again to wherever it was I was going.

"Only I got to like it. I liked it very much. And so I stayed. I compromised, I suppose. You can say that, if you choose. But I felt comfortable, and after a while I felt wise enough to find my way home at night. There were always books to read and plays I hadn't seen, and in the summer Sandra and I—" he caught himself, hesitated, and went on—"we'd drive up to Vermont. I used to write articles during the summers, sort of historical essays. I was going to make a book out of them. And sometimes I'd make up poetry in the bathroom."

He waited for Laura to say something, but she was silent, and he continued, "So I had something to do, something I'd done, someplace to go, and something to look forward to. That's a reasonable way to live. I enjoyed myself living. I had a good time. How much else can you ask for?"

"A lot more," Laura said softly, "if you're greedy. I was greedy once."

"So was I, but that was a long time ago. You're greediest when you're born, and after that it's downhill all the way. Live to be two hundred and you wouldn't demand anything."

"Live to be two hundred and you couldn't use anything."

They were looking directly at each other now and paying no attention to Mr. Rebeck. But he leaned against a tree and watched them. He dug his fingernails into the bark of the tree, and little shreds of it came away under his nails. An ant ran over his shoulder and disappeared into a crack in the bark.

"I'm going to say something a little cruel," Michael said. "I don't mean it that way, but that's how it's going to sound. Do you mind?"

"What difference does it make? Go on."

"Well, here you are," Michael began. He tried to cough, but he had forgotten how it felt and it came out as more of a whistle. "I mean, you seem happy. Happier than you were. Or, putting it another way—what I'm getting at is, you didn't have the hell of an exciting life, did you?"

"No," said Laura. Her smile was too tolerant, Mr. Rebeck thought, too wise, too *tout comprendre est tout pardonner*. "Not very exciting. Dull, if you like. It doesn't hurt."

"Well," Michael said. He tried again. "Well, but just the same, you didn't kill yourself, did you? You didn't go running to meet that truck as if it were the mailman—or a lover, for that matter. And when you saw it coming, no matter how bored you were, no matter how damn dull everything was, you tried to save yourself, didn't you?"

The smile was sliding off Laura's face, like mascara in the rain. She started to say something, but Michael went on, without noticing. "You threw yourself away from death, not at it. That's the human instinct. You didn't make it, but that's not the point. The thing is, when it came down to die, *yes*, or die, *no*—and you had time to choose—you tried not to die. With less reason to live than a lot of other people, you chose life. Right?" He winked triumphantly at Mr. Rebeck and would have jammed his hands in his pockets except that he had long since forgotten what pockets were like.

Laura stood quite still. She seemed, Mr. Rebeck thought, a little less sharply outlined than she had been, a little fainter to the eye, a little more wind-colored. She turned away, pivoting on one foot the way a bored child will, and now there was nothing in her moving of the skipped stone or the paper airplane.

"I don't know," she said. Michael could barely hear her. "No. I wouldn't—I don't know."

"Let it go, Michael," Mr. Rebeck said under his breath, or perhaps he only thought the words and did not say them. Michael did not seem to hear him at all.

"You wouldn't have killed yourself," he said. "Oh, I'm sure you thought about it. People think about everything in their lives. But you put it off until morning, and in the morning you had to get up and go to work. People do that. Me too." He made a sweeping, generous gesture with his arms. "But I never found myself alone at the right moment. And neither did you."

"I don't know, I don't know," Laura said. There was a moment in which she and Michael stood still, poised and waiting but immobile, like weathervanes on a bland summer morning, and Mr. Rebeck leaned against the tree and felt the rough bark under his light shirt and willed them and himself just so forever. Then forever passed and the enchantment expired, and Laura began to run.

There was no sweep to her flight, and nothing feathered or hoofed about it. She ran like a woman, from the knees down, her hands a little in front of her, and her shoulders slightly stooped. And as she ran she seemed to grow fainter, like a soap bubble blown at the sun.

Michael shouted her name, but she kept running until the foliage of a cherry tree caught her up. Then he was silent. His right hand kept closing and opening, and he stared at the cherry tree.

Presently he went over to Mr. Rebeck's tree and sat down. "All right. Be fatherly. What did I do?"

"I don't know," Mr. Rebeck said. "She's very upset."

"That's fine. I'm upset too." He thought of the Thurber cartoon and grinned. "We're all upset. But how come she's more upset than I am? She didn't kill herself."

"Are you sure? She isn't."

"Of course I'm sure. That kind don't kill themselves. They live in hope, waiting for a phone call, or a telegram, or a letter, or a knock on the door, or running into someone on the street who will see how beautiful they really are. They think about killing themselves, but then they might not be able to answer the phone."

"I wonder," Mr. Rebeck murmured. "Surely some of them—"

"Oh, sure, some of them do. They get tired of second-class mail with the address mimeographed and pasted on. But not that one. She wouldn't kill herself. She can afford to play with the idea because nobody's trying to prove she did. Now me, I've got troubles. If anybody's got a right to be upset, I do."

Mr. Rebeck turned his head to look down at him. "Michael, are you still sure your wife poisoned you?"

"Sure? Hell, I'm just surprised she used poison. Sandy always impressed me as the meat-cleaver-type."

"What happened? Do you remember?"

"Up to a point," Michael said. "We went to a party that night, I think. I don't remember who gave it, but I'm pretty sure there was a party. I don't think it went too well. When Sandra and I got to snapping at each other we didn't care where we were. Once we had a real throat-grabber at the Met and they threw us out. Very politely."

"Why did you fight so much?"

Michael shrugged. "Anyway, we came home from the party and maybe we made peace and maybe we didn't." He grinned suddenly. "I think we did both. I remember Sandra made us a couple of drinks, and that was usually a kind of peace offering. But then she went off to the bedroom and I slept in the living room, so there must have been a real shooting war on." He drew up his knees and looked across the clearing where the path ended. "We weren't what you might call a twin-bed family."

"You loved her very much," Mr. Rebeck said.

Michael took it as a question. "Uh-huh. At odd moments. She wasn't the sort of woman you could love for any extended period of time." He shook his head sharply. "So. I went to my celibate couch and I fell asleep fast. *That* must have made her sore. Then—and this I remember very distinctly—I woke up and I was sweating frog ponds. My stomach felt as if I'd swallowed somebody's hot plate."

He looked up at Mr. Rebeck. "Right away I knew Sandra'd poisoned me. I didn't think I'd eaten a bad egg or something. I tried to sit up and I couldn't, and I thought, The bitch did it. The bitch really did it. Then I passed out—died—and when I came to they were singing 'Gaudeamus Igitur' or something over me. The rest is here."

Michael rose and paced a few steps with the peculiar stamping gait that Mr. Rebeck had noticed earlier. "I remember everything as if it were happening now. I tried to forget it, the way I forgot the poetry and whether I ever got to be a full professor, but it stays. She may get away with saying I killed myself. I wouldn't be too surprised if she did. But I know she killed me as surely as I know I'm dead."

Mr. Rebeck straightened up slowly. "Well, we can follow the papers and see how the trial comes out."

"I don't care how it comes out. If they find her guilty, fine. It won't bring pleasant old me back to life, but fine. If they decide she's innocent—well, I know better, and that's always a consoling feeling." He was standing in the middle of the clearing now, with his back to Mr. Rebeck. "Still, we might as well see how it goes. What the hell."

He turned around suddenly. "But I'd like to know what sort of reason she'll give for my committing suicide. She's a fertile-minded wench, but this is for the big money."

"Could she say you'd been—oh, depressed lately?"

Michael snorted. "That was what we fought about. I wasn't depressed. She thought that any man in my position ought to be depressed. My position—she made it sound as if I were tied to some Indian rotisserie." He swung away again and prowled restlessly to the foot of the mausoleum. "Maybe I was, in a way. But Sandra was dancing around the stake, yelling like hell and pouring on the kerosene."

For a moment Mr. Rebeck thought he winced. His image rippled slightly and seemed to fade. Then it was whole again, as if it were a reflection on water and a stone had broken it.

"She didn't mind me being a teacher. Don't think that. She just wanted me to be an important teacher. She was getting a little bored with cooking dinner for me and a few students, and playing the *Threepenny Opera* record in the living room afterward. A hungry woman, my Sandra. Wanted me to realize myself, to be everything she knew I could be. A hungry woman. Very sexy, though. She had beautiful hair."

He was silent then, standing in front of the dirty white building, throwing no shadow on the barred door.

What a fine spot for a few words, Mr. Rebeck thought, from a wise and understanding man. I must write away for one. Perhaps I could put an advertisement in the paper. The raven could figure out something. We could have a wise and understanding man in residence. Somebody ought to.

Michael was looking straight in front of him. Now, without turning his head, he said quietly, "Your lady's coming."

"What?" Mr. Rebeck asked. "Who's coming?"

"Way the hell down the path. Can't you see her?"

"No." Mr. Rebeck came slowly to Michael's side. "No, not yet. Tell me."

"You know the one. The widow. The one who's got a husband buried around here."

"I know her," Mr. Rebeck said. He stood on tiptoe and strained his eyes. "Yes, I do see her."

"Probably coming to visit her husband again," Michael said. He glanced sideways at Mr. Rebeck.

Mr. Rebeck bit a knuckle, "Oh dear," he said. "Oh. Lordy."

"You seem nervous. Anticipatory, one might say. Shall I go away somewhere and count my toes?"

"No, no," Mr. Rebeck said quickly. "Don't do that." He began to take shuffling steps backward, still watching the small figure that approached.

"Taking rather the long way around to visit her husband, isn't she?"

"Yes. I was just thinking that."

"If you're trying to hide behind me," Michael said, "it seems a little pointless."

Mr. Rebeck stopped moving backward. "I wasn't hiding. But I wish I could think of something to say to her. What can I say?"

"Something beautiful," Michael replied carelessly. He began to drift off slowly, like a lost rowboat. "Something crippled and beautiful."

"I wish you'd stay," Mr. Rebeck said.

"I thought I'd go and see about Laura. You've got company. She may want some." He grinned at Mr. Rebeck over his shoulder. "Just be darkly fascinating."

Mr. Rebeck watched him wander along the path. His head was high, higher than he usually carried it. Sometimes he kicked lightly at a pebble or a spring-rotten twig, but not as if he expected them to move. Mr. Rebeck found himself holding his breath as Michael approached Mrs. Klapper, half expecting to see the woman blurred for a moment, as when a thin pulling of cloud passes over the sun. Later he did not remember having had this feeling, but he was to have it several times more and not remember those times either.

But the two figures met on the path that was only wide enough for one, and neither gave way; nor did the woman become bleared or the ghost less transparent. He thought that Michael said something in Mrs. Klapper's ear as they passed each other, but he had no time to wonder what it might have been. For Mrs. Klapper saw him then and waved. She began to walk faster, smiling.

Michael also waved to him, a casual gesture like the flicker of a distant flag, and then vanished beyond the cherry tree. Mr. Rebeck waited for Mrs. Klapper and thought, Maybe she will just say hello and isn't it a fine afternoon and go on to where her husband is buried. That would be the best thing, certainly the best thing for you. He leaned against his tree with his hand behind him and one foot braced on a root and tried to look sanguine, that having always been one of his favorite words.

Mrs. Klapper stopped at the edge of the clearing and peered at him a little uncertainly. Then she came a few steps toward him and said, "Well, hello!"

"Hello," Mr. Rebeck replied. "I'm glad to see you." That was true, but he wondered immediately if he should have said it, because Mrs. Klapper hesitated before she spoke again.

"We keep bumping into each other all the time, don't we?" she observed finally.

"It's our habits, I think. There can't be too many people who spend their summer afternoons in cemeteries."

Mrs. Klapper laughed. "So where can you spend an afternoon now? The parks are full of kids. They play around, they yell, they set off firecrackers, they fight; it's better to take a nice quiet nap in a washing machine. A cemetery is the only place you can hear yourself think."

"I used to go to museums a lot," Mr. Rebeck said. He would have made it "I go to museums a lot," but he was afraid that she might ask him which museums he went to, and he couldn't remember their names any more.

"Morris again." Mrs. Klapper saw the puzzlement on Mr. Rebeck's face. "I mean Morris was also crazy about museums." She sniffed. "For twenty-two years I went to museums with Morris. Once a week it was 'Gertrude, let's go to a museum; Gertrude, it's a beautiful day, let's go to the Metropolitan, they're having a big exhibit; Gertrude, here's a museum, let's stop in for a minute.' Excuse me, I have been to museums. I don't want to see any museums for a while yet. Maybe later."

She was looking up the hill to her husband's tomb, and her voice had become a little softer and slower. Mr. Rebeck looked down and concentrated on his right foot, which pressed hard on a mound of root. The light rain of the night before had made the root a little slippery, and Mr. Rebeck's foot skidded a trifle. Suddenly angry, he threw all his weight on his right leg, stamping his foot against the dark, slick bark. For a moment only he remained balanced; then his shoe squealed off the root and he lurched forward. Mrs. Klapper took a few quick steps toward him, but he was on his feet, muttering, "No, no, no, I'm all right," and waving her away.

"Whoops," Mrs. Klapper said helpfully. "You slipped a little."

"I lost my balance." Let that be a lesson to you, Rebeck, he thought. You are not debonair, and it's a great mistake to pretend that you are, a mistake that may hurt you the way it has hurt other people who thought they were graceful and sanguine. Sanguine. He sighed briefly for the word, as for a vagrant love, and then let it go.

He wished that Mrs. Klapper would say something. She looked very nice in her spring coat. Not beautiful, he thought; beautiful is a word for young people. Beauty is a phase you grow through, like acne. Mrs. Klapper was handsome. Striking. As striking a woman as he had ever seen. But he knew that she had dressed up to please the memory of her husband, and, admiring, he was a bit wistful. She had probably looked forward for days to her tryst with her husband, planning what to wear, what time to come, how long to stay; wondering if the weather would be good and how bad it would have to be to make her stay home; carefully counting out the subway fare, whatever it was now, into her coat pocket before she left the house; keeping track of the subway stations the train passed, because each one brought her that much closer to where her husband was. He wondered how many stations away she lived.

She had not brought flowers. He wondered about that too. Most people swamped the headstone in flowers until it was completely hidden.

"I was coming to see my husband," Mrs. Klapper said then, as if she had known what he was thinking.

"I know," Mr. Rebeck said. Mrs. Klapper turned away from him again to look up the hill, and he thought she would leave then. Indeed, she began to move slowly toward the hill and she did not turn back.

She might at least say good-by, he thought, and he was about to say something like "Don't let me keep you," when Mrs. Klapper turned around. She stood with her legs planted solidly and she held her purse with both hands.

"You could come," she said, "if you're not doing anything."

"I wasn't," Mr. Rebeck answered. "I was just wandering around." He could feel the sudden sweat on his wrists and he wondered if he was frightened. His stomach felt cold.

"Visiting your friend," Mrs. Klapper said.

Mr. Rebeck remembered his supposed acquaintanceship with the Wilders and nodded. "Yes," he said. "It's a quiet place, and we were good friends." He wanted something to lean against, but he stretched his arm behind him and could not find the tree.

"If you're going to see your husband," he went on, "maybe you'd rather go alone. I mean, I wasn't doing anything"—might as well get that in—"but maybe you'd rather go by yourself."

"I don't like going by myself," Mrs. Klapper said. "A little company never hurt anybody." She smiled, her mobile mouth as quick as a whitecap on the sea. "You're worried Morris would mind?"

"It isn't exactly that," Mr. Rebeck began. "I just thought—"

"Morris wouldn't mind. Come on." She half extended her hand to him and then let it drop to her side. "Come on, we'll talk like two friends and make a little noise. Quiet is all right, but enough is enough. Around here it gets too quiet sometimes."

The cold feeling was suddenly gone from Mr. Rebeck's stomach, and in its place a small but earnest thimbleful of wine radiated warmth, like a sun born unexpectedly into a frozen universe. He felt unhooked from himself, dislocated, and he listened with interest to himself saying, "Thank you. I'd like that very much."

Together they walked slowly up the gradual hill beyond which the white house over Morris Klapper loomed and dwarfed the scrubby trees that surrounded it. Neither spoke, nor did they look at each other. Their bodies walked on, while their minds stood a few minutes behind them in the clearing before another house and mused over a still moment when one offered and another accepted.

The building grew great before them, pillar and scroll, marble and iron, far bigger than the Wilder mausoleum, and still the foundation could not be seen. Mr. Rebeck, having just made the pleasant discovery that Mrs. Klapper was smaller than she looked, was practicing looking down at her.

"It's very big," he said. He had never learned to like mausoleums, especially large ones, but he tried hard to get an admiring tone into his voice.

"I wanted it big," Mrs. Klapper answered. "I wanted everybody should know who's buried here." She stopped for a moment to shake a pebble out of her shoe. "You know, I didn't have to give him a big funeral. I mean in his will it didn't say anything about it. His partner said to me—Mr. Harris, his name is—he said, 'Look, Gertrude, all Morris wanted was a little tiny funeral, with maybe a couple of friends and no speeches, please.' He said, 'Gertrude, believe me, we used to talk about it and he didn't want you should fire cannons over his grave or hire a Grand Rabbi.'" She raised her eyebrows at Mr. Rebeck. "Down on his knees, practically. So I said, 'Mr. Harris, I want you to know I appreciate your efforts in Morris's behalf'—just like that—'only I think I knew my husband a little bit better than you did, excuse me, because I was married to him. Morris is going to have a big funeral,' I said, 'with a lot of people, and he is also going to have a big house, marble, the way he wanted it. Maybe you don't want to pay for such a big funeral, Mr. Harris—all right, I'll pay for it. Don't tell me how to bury my husband,' I told him. 'When you die, God forbid, you can have a little tiny funeral and not invite anybody and have a house the size of a cheesebox, but don't tell me how to bury my husband.' "

She was walking faster as she finished, and breathing a bit harder. Mr. Rebeck had to take three short steps to fall into the rhythm of her stride again.

"We could walk a little slower if you're tired," he suggested. Mrs. Klapper looked at him for a moment as if he had suddenly stepped from behind a bush and grabbed her arm. Then she smiled.

"No," she said. "I'm fine." But she did slow her pace, seemingly as unconsciously as she had quickened it.

When they finally topped the low hill they met a man and a woman who greeted them as saviors and asked if they knew where a particular grave was located. And Mr. Rebeck made a mistake, as far as his role of quiet-seeking visitor was concerned. He told them.

He gave the directions carefully, never once noticing the sudden wonder in Mrs. Klapper's eyes. The couple were tired, and angry with each other, and quite lost, and it pleased him that he could help them. So he was quite thorough: he told them the road they must take and the paths they would have to take to reach the road, and he told them to count the marble angels along the way and turn right at a certain angel, and he told them that the grave they sought was very close to the path and would be easy to find. The man and woman were very grateful, and the woman turned around as they walked away and waved at Mr. Rebeck. He waved back.

When he turned around again he met Mrs. Klapper's eyes and knew that he had made a tactical error. There was speculation in her stare, compounded with wonder and a certain amount of awe. She had never looked at him like that before, and the fear that is never far from the hearts of affectionate people returned to his own. He had not considered the effect his casual knowledge of the cemetery might have on her, because he had not even thought of it as knowledge. Someone had asked him for directions, as they had occasionally over nineteen years, and he had known the way. Now, at best, she would mark him as unusual, a freak perhaps, at all events a man with a gimmick memory. She would be amused—she seemed easily amused—but from that time on, she would think of him as a little less than human. That would be the best that could happen. At worst, she would not be amused. She would ask questions, and he would have to lie to her, as he had once before. This depressed him; he did not want to lie to her again, and he knew how poor a liar he was.

He turned away before the couple were out of sight and looked at the mausoleum with his hands in his pockets and his head tipped back. "Well," he said with what he hoped was a calculating but quite unprofessional air. "Well, this certainly is a big house." That was safe. That wouldn't take nineteen years of living in a cemetery to figure out. A man could just look at it and see how big it was. "It certainly is," he said again.

Behind him, Mrs. Klapper said, "I hope they find the place they were looking for."

"Me too," said Mr. Rebeck. "I may very easily have given them the wrong directions. I wasn't at all sure."

"Oh?" Mrs. Klapper was standing at his side now. "You seemed pretty sure."

"Well, you know how it is." Mr. Rebeck smiled hopefully at her. "A man hates to have people think he doesn't know his way around."

Mrs. Klapper smiled back. "Believe me, I understand."

There was a long silence, during which Mr. Rebeck looked at the Klapper mausoleum with frantic admiration and Mrs. Klapper rummaged for a handkerchief in her purse. It took her a while to find it because she was looking at Mr. Rebeck, and when she did find it she held it in her hand for some time and then stuffed it back into her purse.

"One headstone," she said quietly. "That's what gets me. A mausoleum, all right, a mausoleum I could see. But one headstone out of a thousand, five thousand, this takes a very good memory."

"I've got a very good memory," Mr. Rebeck said. It was to be the living-room sorcery then. "I can take a deck of cards and—"

"I know you've got a good memory," Mrs. Klapper said absently. "This must be a real blessing. Me, I'm always forgetting things. Did you ever find your watch?"

The question was asked in such an expressionless tone of voice that it took Mr. Rebeck a moment to realize that it was a question at all. When he did realize it, he answered hastily, without looking at his forearm.

"Yes," he said. "I found it right along Fairview, about a mile from the gate. It must have dropped off while I was talking to you and I didn't even notice it."

As he spoke he looked down at his wrist. It was brown, like the rest of his arm, and covered with fine black hairs. He did not look up immediately.

"I left it home today," he said softly. "It had to be fixed." He raised his eyes very gradually and looked at Mrs. Klapper. "Something was wrong with it."

Mrs. Klapper looked at him for a long time, and he looked back at her. There is nothing marvelous about meeting a person's eyes, he thought. Your eyes may start to water after a bit and you may get a kink in your neck, but the soul is far behind the eyes and doesn't even know what's going on up front. So he stared back at Mrs. Klapper, directly and with dignity, until she began to blur and go out of focus.

It was Mrs. Klapper who looked away at last. She walked to the steps of the mausoleum and sat down. "All right," she said. "Forget it. Forget I asked anything. A woman shouldn't play detective. It makes people lie to her, and then she catches them lying and feels proud of herself. Forget I asked. I'm a nosy old woman and I want to know too much. Don't tell me anything."

Mr. Rebeck rubbed his hand across the back of his neck and felt the sweat there. "Mrs. Klapper—" he began.

"Don't tell me anything." Mrs. Klapper made a cutting motion with the edge of her hand. "It's better I shouldn't know. I got a very bad habit."

Mr. Rebeck rubbed his neck again and looked down at her. Quite suddenly he grinned. "Move over," he said.

Mrs. Klapper blinked at him a little bewilderedly. She moved over slightly on the mausoleum step.

"I have to think for a moment." He sat down beside her and looked at the ground. He could feel her eyes on him, but he did not turn his head.

Rebeck, he thought, you have reached one of those Crossroads people write about. As it is your first Crossroad in a good while, I think you ought to take very good care of it and examine it carefully. Not too long, though, please. There is a hypnotizing quality about Crossroads. You can stand and look at them long and long, as Whitman insisted on putting it, and forget the Cross.

He looked down at his wrist and thought, If you had been wearing a wrist watch for any length of time, there would be a white band around your wrist where the sun could not reach. Hurray for you, Jonathan. You and Mrs. Klapper ought to form a detective society.

Should I tell her now? he wondered. Why not? I've been telling everybody lately. Don't exaggerate, Rebeck. Who is everybody? Michael and Laura. Michael and Laura hardly count. They're ghosts. They know what's possible and what isn't. This woman is alive. Make no mistake about that. She is alive, and that means she can hear the truth. It does not mean that she will know it when she hears it.

You'll have to tell her sooner or later. She'll be just as incredulous whenever you do. At worst, she'll run screaming out of here, which might be very interesting to watch, but lonesome later on. At best—what would she do at best? Probably say something like "Okay, but isn't it a little silly?" What will you do then?

Maybe it is a little silly.

Get off the Crossroads, Rebeck. You are beginning to turn around in small, neat circles. A car might hit you.

Maybe it is silly, he thought again. That has nothing to do with it. A lot of serious things are silly, even to the people who do them. That's no way out.

Look at it another way. If you don't tell her, she won't ask you again, but she won't like you very much because you've made her feel nosy. Oh, she will be friendly and cheerful and all that because she is friendly and cheerful. She'll simply stop coming. Even to see her husband, if it means running into you. On the occasions you do meet, you'll smile and wave furiously at each other, the furiousness increasing in direct proportion to the distance between you. Right there you have the nucleus of one of those fifty-year friendships.

Is she that important to you? Privacy is important too, and there is less of it.

No. She is not that important. Not yet. I barely know her. She is not important as an individual. She is a Symbol.

Oh, that's fine. A Symbol of what?

How should I know? As Symbols go, though, she's very nice.

Mrs. Klapper shifted impatiently beside him. "Rebeck, pardon an old woman, but are you laying an egg?"

Whenever Mr. Rebeck thought about it later on, he was always sure that the scales were kicked over when she called him by his name. She never had before. Laura always called him Mr. Rebeck.

He got up and stretched, thumping his chest as if he were taking a shower. Then he looked down at Mrs. Klapper.

"Come on," he said. "Let's walk."

VIII

HILLS HAD no meaning for Laura any more. She remembered them; in the cemetery there were roads that arched up suddenly, curved and hung, and then dipped to rise again, coiling on themselves like toads' tongues, and these she accepted as hills. Even now, if she thought hard, she could remember what it had been like to climb hills. But the actual rise and fall of land under her feet as she walked did not reach her. Roads and walking she remembered; so under her feet there were pavement and gravel and yellow-brown dirt, pebbles, weeds, grass, even the stunted star that she had been told lived at the center of the earth. Where Laura walked there existed only what Laura remembered, and Laura had forgotten about up and down. So there was no up and down now, exactly as there is no up and down in space, and Laura walked a flat, submissive road that her feet never quite touched.

Actually, she was walking up a small hill, a momentary shoulder-hunch of a road that wound through the poorer section of the cemetery. It was no potter's field; the Yorkchester view was that excessive poverty was just as ostentatious as excessive wealth. The graves were well kept and neat, and the ivy that covered most of them was closely trimmed, but there were so many of them. Headstones crowded within six inches of one another, and statues touched elbows. There were enough Christs, Madonnas, and angels standing in the field to people a thousand heavens, and the short grass that grew between them had a tentative look about it.

The ragged blanket of earth had been stretched about as far as it would go, Laura thought. Sooner or later it would rip down the middle with a sound like fire, and the dead would be revealed, blinking in the light, lying feet to head and feet to head, kicking out with their legs for room to be dead. Get your feet out of my eyes, friend, and quit that talking to yourself. I don't want to hear you. Leave me alone. We're dead. I don't have to be your brother now.

There were a lot of people in the cemetery today. Was it a weekend? Didn't they have anything else to do with their holidays but come out here and stand around a piece of stone with their hats off? She was glad that her parents weren't here. They had sense enough to realize that there is a little dignity in death but none at all in mourning.

To them all—to the middle-aged man laying flowers at the feet of a trim and perfect statue; to the pregnant woman who had brought a wooden folding chair with her; to the three old women who got out of a big car, wept, got back into the car, and drove away; to the yellow-haired young man who sat down on the grass in the middle of a family plot and spoke politely in Italian to all the gravestones—to them all, she said aloud, "Do you think your dead can hear you, do you think they know you weep? They're not here, not one of them, and if they were they wouldn't know you. They're a long way gone and they wouldn't come back if they could. Go home and talk to each other, if you know how. We don't want you here. You didn't want us when we were alive, and now we don't want you. Go away. Tell your bodies to take you home." And although they could not hear her, she felt for a moment that she was more than Laura, that the absent dead had truly chosen her to speak for them.

But then she saw a man standing before the statue of a boy reading a book. The boy's face had the picture-book impersonality of the Christs that flanked him, but something—the round chin, perhaps, or the big ears—made him look young and human. The unlined slickness of marble had trapped a little of that youth. On the front of the bench there was an inscription. Below it were two dates.

The boy himself was sitting on the bench, next to the statue. He was smaller than the statue and very thin and tenuous; a thin line marking a boy's shape in the air. Against the stained marble of his statue and with the sun behind him, he was nearly invisible. The man in front of his grave spoke softly and foolishly, and the boy never moved.

The man reached out a hand to touch the statue and Laura was quickly and completely jealous. She thought, Oh, this is bad, this is really bad. Leave him alone. Must you even envy dead children? You were better alive, when you didn't dare let people see how jealous you were. The familiar swelling ache was in her, for this is an ache of the mind that does not need the body to express itself.

"He comes to see you now," she said to the boy, "to show everyone how much he misses you. But he'll stop coming someday. What will you do then?"

The boy did not turn to her and this infuriated her. It was as if he too were alive and she were the only one of them who could not be heard.

"You'll sit and wait," she said. "He'll never come, but you'll sit and wait for him. People will come to see every grave in the cemetery, but not yours. You wait and look up whenever anyone passes by, but they don't come. They never come. You think you have him now, but you've no one but me, no one but Laura to talk to you and be with you. You're dead now, and you have only me."

But the man murmured softly to the statue, and the boy listened, and the statue continued to read its stone story.

"All right," Laura said. "Do you think I care?" And she turned her back on them all and began to walk up the hill that seemed as level as any other road, as all roads. . . .

Thinking again of the boy, she wondered, Why did I do that? What was it I was trying to do? Whom was I trying to hurt? Not him. Not a dead child. I used to be very good with children. It was part of my charm.

God, I was jealous of so much beauty when I was alive. It ought to stop here. This is no place for envy, for wanting to be like the soft-skinned women. We're equal now. They can't bring their good bodies here, or their smooth little faces. No one will wait for them at lunchtime, or take them home at night. Their men can't see them any more, or touch them, or love them. It takes time, but we're equal in the end. There is no difference between us.

Only the difference between you and that stone boy. Someone remembers him.

Michael's grave and her own were in one of the Catholic sections of the cemetery, about half a mile from the gate. It was a middle-class section, meaning that the graves were not as closely crowded together as in the section she had left, and there were a few small mausoleums. One, by which she recognized the area when she came to it, bore a statue of a kneeling woman clinging to a cross. Laura disliked that one. The cross looked smooth and unreachable. She expected it to free itself from the kneeling woman with a quick shrug, and the woman looked as if she expected it also.

Even as she made it perfectly clear to herself that she was passing Michael's grave only because it was on the way to her own, she saw two people standing before it. She stopped for a moment, ready to hide, before she remembered that they could not see her. Then, irritated because she had forgotten this, she walked up to the two and stood beside them as they looked down at the plain square headstone that said MICHAEL MORGAN.

They were a man and a woman. The man was short-legged and heavy-shouldered, a little shorter than the woman. He was hatless, and his face was truculent and tired. The woman was blond, and her head was small and so subtly and gradually tapered that it seemed almost out of place attached to her full-breasted body. But her waist and hips were slim, and she carried herself with the light arrogance of a Jolly Roger.

She's beautiful, Laura thought. Heavens, she's beautiful. If I were alive I'd hate her. No, I wouldn't, either. What would be the point of it? I used to hate the almost-beautiful women, the pretty women, because I felt that I could look like that if I knew what to wear and what sort of make-up to use and how to walk right. I felt that they knew something secret and were keeping it from me, because if I knew it I'd be just as pretty as they and be able to compete with them for the things I wanted. This one is on another level altogether. I'd never even think of competing with her, no matter how pretty I was. Which is damn nice of me.

"The poison is the big thing," the man said. His voice was high and hoarse. "If you didn't buy it, he did. And if I can find out just where he bought it, we've got something to go on."

The woman's voice was just the way Laura had imagined it would sound. "I don't see how you can. Every little hardware store in the country probably carries it."

The man chortled triumphantly. "Uh-uh. That's just it. You can't get it in New York."

"I don't see—"

"Look, I took the can to a couple of hardware stores, and they told me the same thing in each one. The stuff isn't marketed in New York because it's mostly for field mice. It's strychnine-based, like the standard brands, but it's supposed to be very effective on field mice. Who's got field mice in New York? You see what I'm getting at?"

There were flowers on the grave, roses. The woman knelt to touch one. "Where did it come from, then?"

"That I don't know," the man said. "But it's made by a little outfit in Greenwich, Connecticut. They distribute to about ten or eleven little weed-killer stores all the hell over New England. The way I figure it, if I spend the next couple of weeks chasing around up there, I might be able to trace the stuff back to wherever it was bought. And they just might remember who they sold it to. They keep records. It's worth a shot."

The woman did not rise or turn her head to him. "It's not very much, is it?"

"It's not that bad," the man said defensively. "The thing is, the stuff isn't moving very well. Most people still buy the standard brands, and this stuff just sits on the shelves. When somebody does buy some, it's a big event. Like Christmas. They remember who buys that brand."

He sighed and seemed to slump from the shoulders down. "Sure it's thin," he said sourly. "It's even thinner than it sounds. If the poison was bought more than a month ago, I'm screwed. They won't remember. But what else can I do? I told you before, I'm no Darrow. I'm just persistent as hell. I do what I can with the tools I've got, and all I've got is that poison. So I'll trace it back as far as I can, and if it doesn't work out, I'll try something else. If I can think of something else to try."

"Eleven stores make it difficult," the woman said. She straightened up, brushing dirt and grass from her skirt. "Even if one of them did sell the poison to Michael, they might not remember him."

This is Sandra, Laura realized. This is Michael's wife. She came closer to the woman and stared at her, unconsciously trying to see her less beautiful. She searched the gently pointed face for a skin blemish, tried to will the gray eyes smaller and the nose overlarge. As close as a woman has ever stood to another woman Laura stood to Sandra and, invisible, felt nakedly ugly by comparison.

"They treating you all right there?" the man asked. He slouched as he stood there. Occasionally he would look sideways at the slim woman beside him and make an effort to straighten his slumped shoulders.

"Oh, yes," the woman said. "Very well. They're very polite." She smiled absently, looking at the grave. "I wonder what

Michael would think if he knew I was in jail. Michael was always very protective."

"Yeah," the man said. "That reminds me, fighting with him at the party wasn't a hell of a good idea. The D.A.'ll have everybody who was there in court, and there won't be very much I can do about it. I wish you'd waited until you got home."

The woman turned slowly to face him. "He was drunk. You don't know how it was. He was drunk, and he made a complete fool of himself in front of the chancellor. He told jokes, and he sang, and he kept starting stupid arguments with the chancellor. All the women were looking at me, because I was his wife and I couldn't stop him, and all the men were figuring how they could get closer to the chancellor by taking his side against Michael. Everything I ever worked for went out the window that night. We'd have had to go somewhere else and start all over again. And they write letters about you when something like this happens. I know they do. All the things Michael could have been—"

The man interrupted her, harshly and deliberately. "You see why I didn't let you go before the grand jury? You get all worked up like this and you sound as if you could have killed somebody. Take it easy. You do that in court and you'll make the D.A.'s case for him. At least let's make him work a little."

"You still believe I might have killed Michael." There was a soft and plaintive dignity to the woman's voice that Laura admired, although she knew perfectly well that it was artificial. Women make better innocent victims than men, she thought. They see the drama in the role. Men see only the injustice happening to them, and they howl.

"I think you could have done it," the man said. "I'm pretty sure you didn't. But I'm never really sure of anything."

"That must be sad."

"It's kept me from being married, killed, and disbarred. It's only sad if you think there's one thing sure in the world and you have to keep looking for it. Otherwise it holds up pretty well. Keeps you from spending much time in places like this."

"Michael was my husband," the woman murmured. There was a sleepy, smug look about her eyes, the look one often sees in the eyes of women who have just given birth. "I had to come. I wouldn't have felt right if I hadn't come here today."

"Why? If you're trying to impress the D.A.'s tails, forget it. They're waiting outside. And if you're trying to convince me that you loved your husband, I'll take you home whenever you're ready."

"I loved him as much as I could." The woman stared down at the grave. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm able to give love. I don't think I am. Michael wouldn't have committed suicide if I was."

"That's getting to be a pretty fashionable position," the man said. "Used to be people wrote books about women who slept with the iceman because they were overflowing with love for humanity and they had to start somewhere. Now it's the other way around. Everybody's sorry for the woman who can't love anybody. Now she sleeps with the iceman because she's trying to destroy herself. Doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference to the iceman. Anyway, I wouldn't feel too bad about not loving your husband. He didn't love you."

The woman turned on him so fast that she kicked one of the roses. "That's not so. Michael loved me. If he loved anything in the world, he loved me. He told me so a dozen times a day. It used to frighten me because I knew I didn't deserve that kind of love. I used to warn him not to love me so much." The soft voice had gotten higher, and the narrow face was quite pale. "Don't you ever say Michael didn't love me. There's a lot you don't know about Michael, or about me."

"Ain't it the truth," the stocky man said amiably. "You ready to go now?"

"Not yet," the woman said. She had regained control of herself as quickly as she had thrown it away, but her hands were still clenched and pressed against her sides. "I just want to stand here quietly for a moment. Don't say anything. I shouldn't have let you come with me. Be quiet."

"But first, ladies and gentlemen," the man muttered, "our national anthem." The woman gave him a look of calm disgust and turned away to stare at Michael's grave. Her head was bowed and her hands, open now, seemed conscious of their futility. A breeze ruffled a loose lock of her blond hair, and she did not raise a hand to pat it back into place. All sexuality was gone from her in that moment. She might have been a nun at evening. Even the heavy-shouldered man seemed on the verge of being impressed.

Laura saw the woman's lips move to shape Michael's name, and she thought, Michael's Sandra, you're a hypocrite and you may be a murderess just as naturally. I hope you are. Forgive me that, and forgive my envy of the golden planes of your face, but I hope, and, because I hope, believe, that you killed your husband. Please understand me. I have nothing against you as a person except that you had to warn a man not to love you so much. This seems a waste of natural resources to me, whose hair was straight and dull and who danced like the Washington Monument. My attitude may seem unfair and incomprehensible, but you would understand if you had known me when I was alive. If I were on your jury I would fight to see you set free, but I know you're guilty. That's the way my mind works, or at least that's the way I remember its working. I have to find you guilty because I'm not dishonest enough to find you ugly, and I have to dislike you to keep myself from wanting to be like you. If you knew me you'd understand.

Is that all? she wondered. Is there anything else to say? I have a feeling there is, the same feeling of something left out I've had ever since I came to this place. You try so hard to be honest with yourself and you wind up by making lies a little less pleasant to the taste.

"We can go now," the woman said.

You're forgetting the rose you kicked, Laura told her. Put it back the way it was. It just has to be straightened out a little. I'd do it myself and save you the trouble, but I can't. Would you, please? Thank you.

As if she had heard, the woman knelt gracefully and put the rose back into line with the other flowers. Her long fingers had a slight tint of lemon to them, but her nails were the same shade as the roses. A little darker, perhaps; roses after rain.

Thank you Sandra, Laura said. Good-by. She wondered where Michael was.

"How much time do we have?" the woman asked. She and the man began to walk away from Michael's grave.

"The trial's down for August eighth," the man answered. "Gives us almost a month."

"That's not much time." The soft voice sounded a little worried.

"Time enough. If there's anything for me to find, I'll have it in a month. If I can't turn up anything—" He shrugged heavily. "We can always appeal."

The woman stopped with her hand on the man's arm. "I didn't kill Michael. I won't suffer for something I didn't do."

The man's high chuckle was like sand rattling into a tin pail. He started walking again, and the woman followed him. "Why not? Why should you be different from the rest of us?"

"That isn't funny, damn you," the woman said.

They passed out of Laura's sight, although she could still hear their voices. The man's answer was amused and easy. "That's called gallows humor, lady. It'll get funnier as time passes." From that point on, the voices became blurred, partly because Laura was not listening very hard.

I suppose I could follow them, she thought. I was going to visit my own grave, after all, not Michael's. The trouble is, I don't really want to follow them. I don't want to see them. What do I want with the living? I'm not going to depend on them. If I do that I'll never forget life, never get to sleep. And I've got to stop letting myself be distracted. If I can't be alive, I want to be dead. Dead, as in dead. I don't like this in-between state. It's too much like life and not enough like it. I have to stop looking at live things and being interested in them. Even the scurrying of an ant is treachery, even a dandelion is deceitful and seductive. And that reminds me, I wish I could blow on one of those fat white dandelions. If you make a wish and blow all the fluff off in one breath, the wish comes true. I know. I was never able to do it all in one breath, and my wishes never came true.

The dead have nothing to do with dandelions, and the dead don't make wishes. I'll go to my own grave and lie down again.

Then she heard whistling, and she turned to see Michael coming down the road she had walked. The whistling of a ghost is like no other sound in a fistful of universes, because it is woven of all the whistles the ghost has ever heard, and so it usually includes train moans, lunch whistles, fire alarms, and the affronted-virgin screaming of tea kettles. To all of these components Michael had added an extra memory: the agonized yowl of a car stopping very suddenly in a very short space. It all made for a tuneless and unmelodic sort of sound, but ghosts have no interest in melody. The production of sound is all that interests them. Michael seemed quite pleased with his whistling.

"Hello, Michael," Laura said when he seemed about to pass by without seeing her.

Michael stopped and looked up. "Hello, Laura. Listen, and I'll whistle your name."

He whistled a brief passage of notes that made Laura think of a kite caught in a hurricane. It stopped suddenly, and she said, "Is that all?"

"You ought to have a longer name," Michael said. "Longer and harsher. That's the best I can do with Laura Durand." He sat down in the middle of the road and beckoned her to join him. "I've been doing this all morning—whistling up names for things. Like leitmotivs. You name it and I'll whistle it. Go on."

"Dandelions," Laura said promptly.

"Dandelions. Right." Michael whistled a few bars of a crashing march tune. "Dandelions."

"Not to me. It sounded like dinner music at an American Legion picnic."

"That's the way I see dandelions," Michael said firmly. "I'm an impressionist. If you want program music, get yourself one of those hundred-and-fifty-violin orchestras. Whistling is a very personal kind of music."

"All right," Laura said. "I leave you your integrity. Do Mr. Rebeck."

"I haven't got him yet. I've been trying on and off, but it never comes out. I'm still new at this, remember. Try something else."

For a moment Laura considered saying, "Sandra. What kind of Sandra-music do you have?" She gave up the idea only because she was afraid he might actually have a melody for the name.

At that moment Michael noticed the bright flowers on his grave. "Hey," he said. "Somebody dropped something." He got up and went over to look closely at the roses.

"I'll be damned," he said. "I've got a secret admirer."

"Your wife left them," Laura said. "She was here a few minutes ago."

Michael was silent, his back to her. She could see through to the small marble headstone shining in the sun.

"Very fresh, too," he said after a moment. "And expensive. Eight or ten dollars a dozen. I always wondered why one kind of rose should be worth more than another."

"She just left a minute or so before you came," Laura said doggedly. I'm getting mean again, she thought, and in a way it's worse than with the boy.

"I heard you," Michael said. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"I don't know. She's your wife."

"Nope. Not any more. Death us parted. We are annulled. There's a really terrifying word for you. Annulled."

"You could follow her, I suppose," Laura said. "She was walking very slowly."

"I don't want to, God damn it!" She felt oddly satisfied that she had made him shout. "I don't want to see her. I have nothing to say to her, and if I had she couldn't hear me. She was my wife and she murdered me, and my feelings are understandably hurt about the whole thing. Stop talking about her. I don't want to hear anything about her. Stop talking about her or go away. One or the other."

He had stepped on the roses in his anger. They lay unharmed under his feet, dark red, their outer petals already beginning to curl in the heat of the morning. They had not yet begun to change color. That would come later.

"I'm sorry," she said, and she was, though she did not quite know for what. "I'm very sorry, Michael."

"Forget it," Michael said.

"I get like this once in a while. I don't know why. I never used to when I was alive."

"It's all right," Michael said. "Don't talk about it. Look, are you doing anything right now?" In the same breath he said, "That is conceivably the most stupid thing I ever said, in life or in death."

"No," Laura said. She did not laugh. "I'm not doing anything special. I was just walking around."

"Come with me, then, if you feel like walking. I was heading down to the gate to look at people."

Laura hesitated before she spoke. "I usually stay away from the gate. I used to go down regularly, like going for the mail, but it's begun to depress me. The people and the guards and the cars, and the gate so easy for them to pass—I'd rather not, Michael."

"It doesn't bother me much," Michael said. "I like listening to them. But we don't have to go there."

He frowned for a moment. "I found a place a while ago. Maybe you know it. It's a wall." He glanced at her for any sign of recognition.

Laura shook her head. "I don't think I know it."

"It's right at the edge of the cemetery. A low brick wall."

"No," Laura said. "I'm a stranger here."

"Come on, then," Michael said eagerly. "It's not too far—as if that makes any difference. Come on and I'll show you. It's very nice. Looks out over the whole city—all of Yorchester, anyway. It's a wonderful view."

"I'd like that," Laura said.

"We have to go back where the road forks," Michael said as they walked. "Then it's a straight gravel road with a big hothouse at the end of it. We turn right at the hothouse, and there it is."

"What on earth do they have a hothouse for?"

"You know that fungus-like ivy they have on most of the graves?" Laura nodded. "That's where they raise it. They raise some flowers too, in case you come unarmed."

He turned his head to look down at her. "I was thinking about flowers on graves. Isn't it the hell of a barbaric custom? Look at it logically. It wastes perfectly good flowers. They lie there and wither. Nobody should do that with flowers. And it doesn't mean anything to the dead."

"Yes it does," Laura said. "I like it when Marian and Carl leave flowers for me."

"Why? Does it make you feel that somebody remembers you?"

"No, it isn't that."

"Because they don't, you know, after a while. It becomes automatic, something done, like going to church."

"It isn't that," Laura said. "Oh, I suppose it is, a little, but I like flowers. I liked them when I was alive, and I like them now. They please me."

"They please me too, but there's nothing personal in it. Flowers on anybody else's grave please me as much as flowers on my own. I like flowers as flowers, not as symbols of loss. I know I'm generalizing and oversimplifying and, in general, talking like a college sophomore, but I'm also dead, and gestures toward the honoring of my body don't interest me these days. I'd just as soon they'd buried me with my bow and arrows and killed a horse over my grave. A dead horse on my grave would be fine. Distinctive. Be the first in your gang to get one."

"I saw a boy this morning—" Laura began, but Michael rode right over her.

"And my wife," he said delightedly. "Let them bury my wife with me. There's a useful gift to the departing warrior. Never mind the bloody flowers. Skip the bow and arrows and drag that damn horse away. I want my wife. Just drop her in with me and pat down the earth with a shovel. If you hear noises, it'll be us singing the duet from *Aida*." He grinned at Laura. "There's a personal gift. What do I want with flowers?"

"Your wife is beautiful," Laura said.

He wants to talk about her, she thought. He'd rather forget her altogether, but if he can't do that he'll talk to keep from thinking. I don't mind. I don't think I mind.

"Isn't she, though?" Michael said. There was a touch of grimness in his tone. "In many ways the ranking bitch of the Western world, but, by God, I loved to walk down the street with her. I have to admit that. We used to walk along with our arms around each other's waists—" He broke off the sentence and looked so long at Laura that she became a little nervous and was relieved when he spoke again.

"That's the nicest way of walking I know. Something secure and affectionate about it. Solid."

"I know," Laura said, thinking, I really do know, but I'll bet you don't believe it.

"Anyway," Michael said, "we were walking like that once and we saw ourselves reflected in a store window. I laughed, and she wanted to know why, and I said, 'I was just wondering, What's that bum doing with that good-looking broad?' "

"What did she say?" Laura asked.

"She said, 'I was just thinking the same thing.' We went on walking." Michael sighed. "I wish she hadn't murdered me. We got along well sometimes."

He began to whistle again as they walked along. The sound was high, so high that it would have been inaudible to a human ear. The tune was wailing and mournful, almost flagrantly so, and the total effect was of a heart-broken piccolo being parted forever from its bagpipe lover. But Michael seemed proud of it, and he whistled it contentedly all the way to the gravel path, and when he stopped it was to ask, "She really looked good?"

"Yes," Laura said. "She looked graceful. That's the only word that seems to fit."

"Graceful," Michael said thoughtfully. "It is a good word. Sums her up, in a way. She did everything gracefully."

"There are people like that," Laura said. "People who never look clumsy, no matter what they do. Everything is done just right, everything is said right. If they seemed conscious of it you'd feel better, because you could call them affected and say, 'Well, thank God I'm not like that.' But with these people it's completely natural, like a cat stretching."

She felt that she was stumbling and straining for words, but the sudden curiosity with which Michael was looking at her drove her on. It was like running downhill, arms spread wide, hoping not to fall but expecting it momentarily. She wanted Michael to understand.

"Sometimes you walk along the street and you see someone coming, somebody you know. He hasn't seen you yet, but you know he'll wave and smile and say something as soon as he sees you. And all at once, in the moment before he sees you, you think, I'm going to foul this up. I don't quite know how, but I'm going to. I can hardly wait to see how I do it. Will I stop and stick out my hand when he expects me to wave and pass by, and will we stand there, a little island of embarrassment in the middle of the street, with people jostling us and our hands sticky? Will I let go of his hand before he is ready to let go of mine, or will it be the other way around? What will I say when he calls, 'How's it going?' Will I just grunt like an idiot, or will I stop and tell him? Am I brave enough to walk on and pretend I don't see him? What terrible thing is going to happen in the next five seconds? . . . So you wait five seconds and find out."

That was pretty good, she thought. I never said it that way when I was alive. And he's looking at me and thinking about it. Maybe it was worth saying.

Two white butterflies danced across the path with the rambling abandon of ribbons in the wind. They spun around each other, like a double star, broke apart, and fled away down the gravel path, one close behind the other.

"Anyway, that doesn't ever happen to the graceful people," she said. "I don't know why, but it doesn't. Maybe it's due to a gene or a lack of one."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Michael said, and she gasped with shock.

"I'm not feeling sorry for myself! I never do. That's one of the things I learned very early—it's useless to feel sorry for yourself, and it's ugly besides. I haven't pitied myself in years."

"All right," said Michael. "Keep up the good work."

His calm amusement angered her. "And I don't hang on to things—life or people or objects or anything. I told you that once. I let things go. It might do you a lot of good."

"Maybe," Michael said. "That's where we differ. What I love I hang on to. With both hands, and my teeth, if I can get a good grip."

"Even if it doesn't love you?" Laura demanded.

"Even then. Especially then. Anybody can love something that loves you back. The other way takes a certain amount of effort."

"We see things differently, then," she said, and they walked on silently.

The gravel road made a gradual turn, and they saw the hothouse. Michael pointed at the greenness that crowded against its glass sides.

"See," he said. "That's the ivy. Unprepossessing, isn't it?"

Laura nodded. The ivy seemed squat and sullen in the glass house. "I wonder," she said aloud, "if that's the same type of ivy that's supposed to grow on college walls."

"Might be," Michael said. "It has the same arrogantly useless look. I wouldn't be surprised."

He pointed again. "And the wall's right over there. Can you see it?"

"Yes," Laura said. The wall was about as high as her shoulders, and perhaps seventy-five feet long. The gravel road ended in a kind of dusty hollow, and the wall fenced off the open end of the hollow. It was made of reddish-brown bricks, and it had been made with too much mortar. As they approached it they could see the hardened cement bulging and spilling thickly between the individual bricks.

Michael stopped at the wall and turned to her. "Do you know how to jump?"

"I guess so," she said dubiously. "What do you do?"

"Like this," Michael said. He flickered out of sight for an instant and reappeared sitting cross-legged on top of the wall.

"It's like thinking yourself places," he explained, "only it's for such a short distance that you have to be careful not to overshoot. Concentrate on getting the jump just right and forget about being visible for a moment. Be careful. It's tricky the first few times."

Laura made it on the fourth try and sat beside him on the wall. "I'd feel excited and breathless," she said, "if I had any breath to lose. That's the great disadvantage of not having a body. You forget what it's like to rest when you're tired."

"You're never satisfied," Michael said, but he smiled. "Look now. Look over there."

Below the wall the land fell away abruptly to a last field of cheap, chalky headstones. Beyond the field she saw the great fence that ran all around the cemetery, and beyond the fence there was the hard grillwork of the city.

"I never saw this," she said. "I was never here before."

From where they sat on the wall they could see almost all of Yorkchester. The buildings stood up in pinkness, differing from one another only in the number of television aerials that they wore like hairpins. Between them, cars clustered in the streets like bunches of a sour fruit. The flat wind of summer slid across the city, lifting skirts without any real interest, and the people moved slowly in the streets. On the skyline there rose the proudly naked skeleton of what would probably be a housing project. There was movement on it, and Laura was sure she could hear the workmen shouting. A three-lane highway ran parallel to the city, agreeable to keeping it company for a little, but sleekly separate even when the streets of the city ran into it.

Michael saw Laura looking at the highway and said, "There was a river there before the highway. First they thinned it down to a trickle. Then they changed its course three or four times. Finally the damn thing just disappeared. Died of frustration, I think."

She could hear every sound in the city, Laura thought. She heard the car horns, and the curses in the streets, and the children crying in the heat, and the clicking of light switches in the office buildings. She heard the thrumming of the electric fans in the subway trains, and the sounds that different kinds of heels make on different kinds of pavements, and the bouncing of rubber balls against the sides of buildings, and the shrill yells of the workmen on the housing project. She even heard the clear clatter of coins in the money machines of buses.

Beside her, Michael murmured, "And the devil took Faust up on a high place and showed him all the cities of the world."

Laura reluctantly took her eyes off the city before her. "Is that Faust? There's something like it in the Bible, about Christ."

"Both, I think," Michael said. "Faust gave in and Christ didn't, that's all. The devil couldn't meet Christ's price, and so Christ went uncorrupted. There are honest people in the world, but only because the devil considers their asking prices ridiculous."

Laura laughed. "Now you sound a little like that man who was with your wife."

"What man?" Michael asked sharply.

"I don't know his name. I think he's her lawyer."

"Oh," Michael said slowly.

After a moment he said, "Excuse me for snapping at you."

"I didn't notice," Laura said. She looked out at the city again. "Anyway, this isn't exactly all the world. It's only Yorkchester."

"It's all we've got. Hell, it's more than we've got. If the devil offered it to me right now—" He left the sentence unfinished.

"Michael," Laura said suddenly.

"Uh-huh?"

She began to tell him about the statue of the boy she had seen in the morning. She told it carefully, putting in every detail she could remember, including the statue's book and the things the man had said as he stood there. When she came to the parts where she had threatened the boy and told him that nobody would come to see him, she faltered a little and looked away from Michael, but she told him everything that she remembered. He listened quietly, never smiling or interrupting her.

"I don't know why I did it," she finished. "Every time I think about it I get more and more ashamed of myself. I never did that sort of thing while I was alive, Michael, no matter what I felt. Why should I do it now? What did I think I was gaining from it?"

Michael shrugged. "I don't know, Laura. I don't know you well enough. Maybe you just got tired of being sweet and shy. This happens. It's a bastardly role to play. It doesn't matter. You didn't hurt him."

Deliberately and openly he changed the subject by pointing a third time toward Yorkchester. "Do you like it? Are you glad I brought you here?"

"Yes," Laura said quickly, glad for the opportunity to stop talking about the boy. "I love sitting and looking at it. I could sit here all day."

"I have. You should see it at night. Like a birthday cake."

"I love the sounds. Probably because the cemetery's so quiet. I find myself going in search of noises."

"Tell me some," Michael said. "What do you hear?"

"People talking," Laura began, "and traffic, and airplanes overhead—" She stopped and turned to him. "Why do you ask me? Can't you hear them yourself?"

Michael shook his head. "Not a sound. Never, since I died."

"I don't understand," Laura said slowly. "You can hear me, can't you?"

"Loud and clear. I hear whoever I'm talking to, and I hear whatever sounds you can hear in a cemetery. But I can't hear a thing from that damn city."

He smiled wryly at her puzzlement. "All the sounds we hear are sounds we remember. We know how talk and trains and running water should sound, and if we're a little off in remembering, a little sharp or flat, nobody notices. But I just don't remember how Yorkchester sounded, all in all. I didn't pay very much attention, I think."

"I'm sorry—" Laura said awkwardly.

"Never mind being sorry. You and I waste entirely too much effort apologizing to each other. Just tell me some of the sounds you hear. I'll listen."

Laura hesitated. "I don't really know where to begin. There's a pile driver working over by that new building."

"What does it sound like?" When she did not speak, he added, "It's all right. Tell me what it sounds like to you."

"Like a heartbeat," Laura said. "Very heavy and regular. A slow, slamming heartbeat."

"Uh-huh. What about subway trains? Can you tell me about those?"

"Not right now," Laura said. "I'll tell you as soon as one comes. I can tell you about buses in the meantime."

"All right," Michael said. "Fine. Tell me how buses sound."

So Laura told him about buses, and they sat on the wall all that summer day, listening to the city and the trains.

IX

Somewhere between two and three in the morning, Mr. Rebeck gave up the struggle. "This is not going to work," he said. He stood up, barefooted, in a swirl of blankets and cushions and went to the open door of the mausoleum to consider the matter.

I am not going to get any sleep tonight, he said to himself. For all I know, I may have evolved beyond the need for sleep. Perhaps I will never sleep again. Well, that may not be too bad. I can spend my nights working on the very hard chess problems, the ones I have never been able to solve, and maybe I can teach myself a little about astronomy. I could start right now.

But he did not move. He leaned in the doorway, shivering pleasantly at the touch of cold iron against his skin. The night air was warm, even a trifle humid, but whenever it threatened to become stagnant a breeze disturbed it, as small bugs skitter away the dignity of a still pond. The sky was dark but completely cloudless. Tomorrow would be a very hot day, with the kind of heat that lasts long after sundown, betraying the night. The days following it would probably be hot too; late July in New York is the time when the hot days run in packs.

The trouble is, Mr. Rebeck thought, that if I haven't worked out these chess problems in nineteen years of days, I don't see what difference the nights will make. If I had it in me to find the answers, I would have found them long ago. And the same applies to knowing about the stars. I could never be an astronomer. I haven't got the brains. I am a druggist who has read a few books. I haven't taught myself anything here. I have just remembered a few things that bored me when I lived in a different world and changed my clothes every day. Forget it, Jonathan, and go back to sleep. And before you go to sleep, pray that no well-meaning god ever makes you immortal.

He turned and went back into the mausoleum, but he did not lie down to sleep. Instead he groped in a sock-cluttered corner and drew forth his old red and black bathrobe and a pair of battered bedroom slippers. He put them both on and went outside again, closing the iron door behind him.

I'll go down to the gate, he thought, just for the sake of the walk. Maybe it will tire me out and make me sleep when I get back. Besides, I can get a drink from the water fountain in the lavatory.

So he knotted the belt of his bathrobe around his thin waist and walked through the grass until he felt the loose gravel of Central Avenue rolling under his slippers. Then he set off down the long road, trying out of habit to make as little noise as possible. There was no moon to light the way, but Mr. Rebeck padded along the road with the brisk air of a man who knew what he was doing and would have rejected the moon as an impertinence. He felt it himself. How wonderful it is to feel competent, he thought. Every man should know something in the world as well as I know this road. It fits my feet. I could walk it drunk and blindfolded and never lose my way. But I wish somebody could see me. I wish I could show somebody how well I can walk this road in the middle of the night. . . . And that, of course, made him think of Mrs. Klapper. He would have, anyway, but it was more fun to let her gradually creep into whatever he was thinking. It felt more natural.

Mrs. Klapper thought he was crazy. She told him so every time she saw him. Any man who would live in a cemetery, she told him, was not only crazy but guilty of extremely bad taste. What a place for visitors to have to come! How did he get his mail? What did he do in the winter? Could he at least take a bath once in a while? How did he eat? The latter question almost led to Mr. Rebeck's complete undoing. He had begun to tell her about the raven when he realized that Mrs. Klapper's credulity had been stretched as far as it would go and would snap at the slightest mention of a profane black bird bringing him food. He quickly changed the raven to a very old friend, a childhood companion who kept him supplied with food out of respect for the lost youth they had shared. He told it very well and wished it were true.

Mrs. Klapper was not impressed. She sniffed. "Some friend. How come he doesn't say, 'Come on over to my place, I'll put you up,' he's such a friend?"

"I wouldn't think of imposing on him," Mr. Rebeck had said. He drew himself up and looked sternly at her. "I do have some pride, after all."

"Hoo-boy," Mrs. Klapper hooted derisively. "Suddenly it's pride. A proud crazy. Look how he sits up, like a general. Ah, Rebeck, you're such a *schmuck*."

But in the three weeks since he had disclosed his manner of living to her she had come often to the cemetery. For a while he had taken to sitting on the mausoleum steps in the afternoon, waiting for her to come. Recently, though, he had begun to walk down the road to meet her because Central Avenue ran uphill from the gate, and Mrs. Klapper was not built for much uphill walking. Besides, he found himself eager for the moment when she caught sight of him—he always saw her first—and waved her arm and yelled, "Hey, Rebeck! It's Klapper!" There was nothing planned about the greeting, even though it was always the same. He felt that she was glad to see him and wanted to make sure that he noticed her. For himself, the exuberant shout made him feel real, a person who clashed enough with the scenery to be recognized, and hailed, and called crazy.

Man searches constantly for identity, he thought as he trotted along the gravel path. He has no real proof of his existence except for the reaction of other people to that fact. So he listens very closely to what people say to one another about him, whether it's good or bad, because it indicates that he lives in the same world they do, and that all his fears about being invisible, impotent, lacking some mysterious dimension that other people have, are groundless. That's why people like to have nicknames. I'm glad Mrs. Klapper knows I exist. That should count for two or three ordinary people.

The road broadened, spreading to a kind of delta of pavement, at one side of which there shone the single light of the caretaker's office. Directly across from it, about thirty yards away, the far more impressive shape of the lavatory bulked in darkness. The road itself ran straight to the entowered gate, padlocked now, as it had been since five in the afternoon. Mr. Rebeck turned his eyes away from it. He never looked at the gate more than he had to.

He was very quiet, slipping into the lavatory. The first thing he did was to close the heavy door, knowing from experience that an unavoidable noise, such as the flushing of a toilet or the running of water in a sink, could not now be heard unless the listener were standing only a few feet from the door. Then he turned on the dim fluorescent light on the ceiling. There was no window on the side of the building that faced the caretaker's office, and the light was so dim that there was very little chance of its being seen under the door.

He used one of the urinals, keeping a nervous eye on the door. In his recurring dream of discovery, it was often at moments like this that the doors—there were always several doors in his dream—burst open and the faceless captors came rushing in upon him from all sides. He drank from the water fountain set near the row of sinks, opened the door carefully, and stepped outside to face the shadows that reminded him of iron dogs, frozen in wait for some quarry. He was deeply glad that they paid no attention to him. Years ago he had thought that they bared bright teeth at him in recognition and too eager welcome.

Tonight, however, a new shadow stood among the shadows, a Monster among the iron hounds. The shadow moved through them, shoving the tensely patient dogs out of its path, faced Mr. Rebeck with its hands on its hips, and said, "You!"

It had come, then. That was how they said it in the dream —"*You!*" There were more of them in the dream, and they were shouting, but it was the same word. They were aware of his existence now; he had identity in their minds, and he was almost grateful for it.

"Me?" he said, questioning his new-found status, as if he were not quite able to believe that the gift was really for him, that there had been no mistake.

"Come here," the man said, gesturing imperiously with a heavy forefinger. "I said, come here," he repeated when Mr. Rebeck did not move.

Mr. Rebeck went slowly toward him, feet dragging on the pavement. The man became huger and darker as Mr. Rebeck came closer, until at last Mr. Rebeck stood in front of him, peering up into his face with his neck slightly twisted, as if he were following the drift of a great thundercloud. The man's features—nose, mouth, eyes, chin, forehead—were all large and prominent, except for a pair of ridiculously small ears, fitting so close to his head that they were almost lost by contrast with the shock of burnt-black hair that finished one end of the man.

He pointed back toward the lavatory over Mr. Rebeck's shoulder and asked, "You finished in there?" His voice was deep and without expression.

"Yes," Mr. Rebeck said. He thought that it was decent of the man to ask.

"Okay," the man said. He jerked the pointing arm at the lavatory. "Now you just go back there and turn off that electric light. Go on back there."

Mr. Rebeck was quite sure that he had heard him correctly. His hearing was very good for a man of his age, and he had been listening closely to this big man. When he said, "What?" it was only because he wanted the man to say the words again. He thought the man might have made a mistake, and he wanted to give him every chance.

"Go on back there," the man repeated. "Hurry up. Turn that light off. You don't leave no electric lights on here. Wastes."

"Right away," Mr. Rebeck said. He went back into the lavatory and switched off the light. Then he came back to face the big man and stood silently in front of him, still awaiting judgment, but wondering now if it might not have been derailed somewhere between the man and him.

"Good," said the big man. He stared silently down at Mr. Rebeck, who blinked and looked away, noting as he did so that the big man's left hand clutched a half-empty bottle. Whisky, Mr. Rebeck supposed, and allowed himself a quick bite of hope.

"Okay," the man said. "Now I got to go. You stay here and stay put." He thrust the bottle into Mr. Rebeck's open hand. "Here." He chuckled tonelessly. "That'll keep you here. Be right back. You just stay the hell there."

He turned around and walked quickly into a clump of bushes at one side of the lavatory. Hardly had he disappeared when the bushes crashed and chattered and the man's huge head stuck out, his eyes searching out Mr. Rebeck among the shadow-hounds.

"You think I'm kidding, buddy?" the deep voice demanded threateningly.

"No," Mr. Rebeck said, not daring to move. "I'm sure you're perfectly serious."

"Show you who's kidding," the man mumbled. He shook a drum-sized fist at Mr. Rebeck, and his head disappeared in the bushes. Mr. Rebeck stood alone and waited for the man to return.

Run now, he told himself. Keep out of the light and run. In two hundred yards he won't be able to see you. Run, fool! Has your mind finally forgotten to come home? But he stayed where he was, knowing that the man could simply wait until dawn, enlist the aid of a few guards, and run him down. They had cars and a truck. If they wanted to, they could find him in a day. There would be no dignity to it, only sweating and fear and the yells of discovery and the dragging him from wherever he was hiding, laughing at his bony efforts to escape. . . . It was quieter this way, and less painful. Running would be painful.

He looked curiously at the long-necked bottle in his hand. It was too dark for him to read the label, and he assumed it was whisky. He had drunk very little in his days in the world and of course, not at all since the monumental bat that had brought him into the cemetery. He sniffed cautiously at the open neck of the bottle and found the smell dizzying and completely strange. There was not a part of him now that remembered the aroma of whisky. He imagined that he ought to be glad.

The bushes crackled again, and the big man stood in the light, buckling his belt. His head turned slowly from side to side, like a cannon, as he looked for Mr. Rebeck. "You there, buddy?" his cannon-voice tolled into the night. "You there?" He seemed anxious.

"I'm over here," Mr. Rebeck called. His common sense gave him up as senile, locked up for the night, and went home.

"Good," the man said. He came toward Mr. Rebeck, who was sure that he could hear the ground shake.

Mr. Rebeck remained where he was, holding the bottle as tightly as he could. A feeling of unreality shook him violently and left him feeling a little sick. "What am I doing here?" he said aloud. "I'm Jonathan Rebeck. I'm fifty-three years old. How did I get here?"

The man took the bottle from Mr. Rebeck's hand. He drank from it, his Adam's apple bobbing like a bell buoy. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glared down at Mr. Rebeck. Big as a truck, big as a bulldozer he was, and he rocked up and down on his heels and scowled at Mr. Rebeck, and his shadow moved with him on the hard pavement.

Then, quite suddenly, he scratched his head. His right hand came all the way up from where it hung by his side and burrowed into his coarse hair, digging into his scalp with a sandpapery sound. He blinked. The two gestures made him look young and uncertain of his strength.

"What'm I gonna do with you?" he asked. It was a direct question, and he waited for an answer.

"I don't know," Mr. Rebeck said. He felt suddenly angry and put-upon. "That's your job. I'm not going to help you."

"I got no more rum," the big man said defensively. He pressed the bottle he held against his thigh, as if trying to hide it. "This's all I got left. I need it."

"All right," Mr. Rebeck said. "I don't want it."

He wasn't all that big, Mr. Rebeck decided. Very big for a man, yes, but familiarity and the head-scratching had taken him out of the bulldozer class. In the light from the wide-open door of the caretaker's office Mr. Rebeck saw that the man's eyes were dark blue and, at the moment, puzzled. He felt somewhat better. He had expected the man's eyes to be colorless and no more expressive than tree trunks.

"Ah, what the hell," the man said finally. "You come with me." He went toward the office, looking back occasionally to make sure Mr. Rebeck was following him. At the door he waved Mr. Rebeck to a stop and vanished into the small building. Mr. Rebeck heard something crash to the floor, heard the man's short, inventive obscenity, and the sound of a filing-cabinet drawer sliding open. He waited where the man had left him and thought, He must be new and unsure of himself, so he has gone to call his relief. In a few minutes there will be a man here who knows what to do with trespassers. People who knew what to do always impressed Mr. Rebeck in spite of himself.

A yell of triumph in the office, another crash, and the man was in the doorway, holding up a fresh bottle. "Found the sonofabitch," he exulted. "Lying right under m' very nose." He held the bottle against his nose and giggled. "Lucky I had a very nose. Here." He offered the bottle to Mr. Rebeck. "Here. While I think what to do with you."

Mr. Rebeck did not take the bottle. He tightened the belt of his bathrobe and demanded, "Are you the guard on duty?"

The big man nodded. "Me. On duty from midnight to eight. Then I go home."

"Well, for heaven's sake," Mr. Rebeck said indignantly, "guard something! What kind of a guard goes around offering drinks to everybody he meets?"

The big man treated the question seriously. "Don't tell me," he said. He closed his eyes tightly, screwed up his forehead, and murmured possible answers to himself.

"A generous guard," he suggested. "A dumb, generous guard. Right?"

Mr. Rebeck was a neat man and a respecter of property. The man's attitude pained him. "Damn it," he said, "for all you know I might be a thief. How do you know I'm not trying to steal something?"

Deep, rum-warmed laughter chugged out of the man. "Nothing to steal. Thieves don't come messing around cemeteries. What for?"

"Body-snatchers do," said Mr. Rebeck, unwilling to concede the point. "Grave-robbers do. Maybe I'm a grave-robber."

The blue eyes inspected him seriously. "Have to be a pretty small grave. You only got one pocket."

Somebody was going to have to awaken this man to a sense of his responsibilities. It was lucky that he had come along, Mr. Rebeck thought. He set his feet firmly and tapped his open palm with a forefinger.

"You're not supposed to make decisions," he said patiently. "You're not supposed to decide who's a thief and who isn't. That's not your job. Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah," said the man. He shook the bottle in Mr. Rebeck's face. "Look, you want this or you don't?"

"Give it to me," Mr. Rebeck said warily. He was glad that the man did not seem about to arrest him, but the man's cavalier dismissal of his duties saddened and faintly disgusted him. He thought of all the nights when he had sneaked fearfully into the lavatory, tiptoeing, desperately willing the door not to squeak, hearing his doom in every echoing step he took, afraid even to glance at the lighted building on the other side of the road because he might somehow draw the guard's attention. I could have come marching down in army boots, he thought bitterly, singing drinking songs and throwing rocks at his door, and he wouldn't even have turned in his sleep. He realized now that he had enjoyed the furtive excursions and was sorry that there would be none ever again.

He drank from the bottle, not choking, although it was his first drink in nineteen years. The chocolate-charcoal flavor of the rum warmed the back of his throat as it went down.

"Thank you," he said, and offered the bottle to the big man.

The man shook his head. "Yours," he said, shoving the bottle back at Mr. Rebeck with enough force to send him staggering. "Until I finish mine."

"Well, that's fair enough," Mr. Rebeck said, and drank again. Then, remembering his manners, he held out his hand to the man. "My name is Jonathan Rebeck," he said.

"Campos," said the big man. He shook Mr. Rebeck's hand with the taut gentleness of a man who knows his own strength and released it almost at once. "Let's sit down somewhere with this stuff."

"Very well," Mr. Rebeck said. "But I want one thing clear. You're a fine fellow, and you set a fine table, but you are the worst guard I ever saw. Let there be no pretensions between us."

"None," Campos agreed. "None of them. Only I always thought I was a pretty good guard."

"You're a terrible guard," Mr. Rebeck said earnestly. He touched Campos's arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. But some things must be said."

"I'm a terrible guard," Campos mused aloud. He shrugged lightly. "Well, learn something new every day. Come on, sit down."

They sat down together in the grass in front of the caretaker's office. Campos immediately jumped to his feet and dashed into the office, returning almost instantly with a leather-covered portable radio clutched against his chest.

"My music," he explained. He put it down on the ground, turned it on, and tuned it until he found a station that played classical music. Then he leaned back against the wall of the building and grinned at Mr. Rebeck. "Great stuff," he said. "Listen to it all the time."

Mr. Rebeck settled himself beside him. "It's very pretty," he said comfortably. He held the bottle in his lap, rolling it between his palms.

"Listen to it all the damn time," Campos said. "Ever since I been working here."

"How long has that been?"

"Year now. Walters got me the job."

Mr. Rebeck was uncautious. "That's the man with light hair?"

"Yeah." Suspicion flared for a moment in Campos's blue-ink eyes. "How come you know what Walters looks like?"

The light-headed feeling of reprieve that Mr. Rebeck had been allowing himself died in his stomach with a reproachful murmur. A trickle of rum got into a cut on his lip and stung.

"I've seen him," he said, "when I was here before. I saw him driving in the truck. I think you were with him at the time."

Campos was not to be put off. His huge hand closed on the bottle that Mr. Rebeck held and jerked it away. "Don't go slopping my rum like that. How come you're in here this time of night anyway? We close at five."

"I got locked in," Mr. Rebeck said promptly. He smiled appeasingly at Campos. "You know how time flies when you're visiting someone. And before I knew it—"

"You didn't come in here running around in no bathrobe," Campos said. He pointed at Mr. Rebeck's feet. "Nor in no carpet slippers. Walters wouldn't let you. I might, because I might be listening to my music and not noticing things. You might get past me, because I don't notice things sometimes, but Walters wouldn't let you in here dressed all like that."

He ended on a triumphant upbeat, and Mr. Rebeck twisted the hem of the terrycloth bathrobe and knew himself trapped. There was nothing for it now but to throw himself on Campos's mercy, and it had been Mr. Rebeck's experience of mercy that it had a tendency to buckle under the weight of a human soul. But he was tired, and it was three in the morning, and sitting side by side in a cemetery with this strange and suspicious man was aging him rapidly. If it must be, let it be now, before the rum and the appearance of friendship were quite finished.

"I live here," he said evenly. "I live in an old mausoleum and have for a good while. Now either call the police or give me back that rum. I'm too old for this sort of thing."

"Sure," Campos said. "Didn't even realize I had it." He gave the bottle back to Mr. Rebeck, who stared at him for a moment and then drank with painful-sounding gulps. Campos patted his back when he finally choked, and helped him to sit up straight.

"See, I knew Walters wouldn't let you in," he explained, "so I figured it was something like that." He reached out to finger the material of the bathrobe. "Catch cold running around in that. Catch a real mean cold."

"No I won't," Mr. Rebeck said. "It's a very warm night."

"All the same," Campos said. He turned the radio up louder and listened intently to a string quartet. It was a Mozart piece, or a Haydn. The little Mr. Rebeck had ever known about classical music he had utterly forgotten. But he saw Campos looking at him for approval, and he closed his eyes and hummed softly to indicate that he was following the music.

"Great, huh?" Campos's face was eager for endorsement of his taste. "All them fiddles. They make me feel loose."

"Loose," said Mr. Rebeck. He was a little afraid to make a question out of it. "Yes. Loose."

"Like I was twenty and not working for anybody and I could fly," Campos said. "Like that, loose."

Together they listened to the string quartet. The music was happy on top and sad on the bottom, and it warmed Mr. Rebeck's stomach as much as the rum. He lay back on the grass with his hands beneath his head and the bottle of rum balanced on his chest and looked up through the trees at the few stars there were.

This is very pleasant, he said to himself. It seems unusual to me because I haven't done very much of it, but this may be what a man is for. It may, of course, not be. It may be simply a very nice way to spend time, with music and something to drink and a friend—although he did not know if he could honestly consider Campos a friend. He was much too unpredictable, even for a friend—no more good or evil than the wind, and just as trustworthy. Still, there was a debt between them now, and drink shared, and this often makes a good friend-glue.

When he heard Campos's cheerful "Hello," he was sure that the big man was greeting another guard, and he pressed himself flat against the earth, feeling pinned and helpless. But when he heard the familiar voice of Michael Morgan answer Campos, he sat up so quickly that the bottle of rum rolled off his chest and would have spilled its contents if Campos had not snatched it out of the air. He looked up the road and saw Michael and Laura coming down together.

They looked extremely tangible, he noticed, extremely human. Part of that was understandable—their transparence was not evident against the blackness behind them. But there was more to it than that. There was an edged clarity about them, and a new sharpness of detail about their faces and bodies, as if they had looked at each other's eyes and suddenly remembered how their own were set. They walked easily; Michael did not stamp on the earth nor Laura flinch from it with each footstep. They looked almost real enough to cast shadows or be reflected in mirrors.

But this shivered through his mind and vanished. Now he stared from Campos to Michael and heard the man and the ghost call to each other. He heard both of them laugh and could tell only that one laugh was deeper and rougher than the other. Laura saw him and called his name. He nodded stiffly in reply, feeling older than he was.

"Can you see them?" he asked Campos in a wondering whisper.

"Sure," Campos said. "What kind of a dumb question is that?" Mr. Rebeck did not answer.

Campos stood up as Michael and Laura approached and demanded, "Where you been?"

"All the hell over," Michael answered. "We've been selling beads and pottery to the tourists. It's not much, but we manage in our primitive way. Sometimes she does a little primitive dance for them while I'm filling out the primitive sales slip. Sends them away happy."

"Hello," Laura said to Mr. Rebeck. She sat beside him and put her hand on his. He could not feel her fingers, but his own felt suddenly cold.

"Hello, Laura," he said. And because he could think of nothing else to say, he added, "I haven't seen you in a while."

"We meant to come," Laura said. "We'd have come." She followed his glance at Michael and Campos and smiled. "Are you surprised that we can talk to Campos too?"

"Very," Mr. Rebeck said. "I don't quite understand it."

"Neither do we, honestly," Laura said. "It was Michael. He ran into Campos first. I only met him later."

Michael turned his head to her. "What did I do?"

"You met Campos," Laura said. "I was telling Mr. Rebeck."

"So I did," Michael said complacently. "He was driving along in his truck and I stepped into the road and tried to put the whammy on him, because I wanted to see if there was anything to all the old ghost stories. The dirty dog ran right over me. Through me, really."

"I knew you were a ghost," Campos said. "Anyway, didn't I go back to make sure?"

"Oh, you did that. That I will grant you. To make sure you hadn't spoiled the pelt." He looked at Mr. Rebeck. "Well, it turned out that he could see me and talk to me, the same way you can. And Laura and I got into the habit of coming down to visit him when he's on the night shift. We sing to him and tell him stories. It keeps him awake."

"I see," Mr. Rebeck said. He sighed, and his body relaxed. "Excuse me for seeming startled. It's just that I always wondered if I might not be the only man in the world who could see ghosts. I know it sounds greedy, but after a while I began to feel that I was."

"There's never just one of anything in the world," Michael said casually. He turned back to Campos. "Listen, night watchman, watcher of the night, sing me that song about the tree. I keep forgetting it."

"It's not about a tree," Campos said. "I tell you and tell you."

"All right, it's not about a tree. It has nothing to do with trees. Now sing it."

Campos began to sing very softly. The string quartet was still going on the radio, and Campos's guttural, almost rasping, voice sounded like a fifth stringed instrument, tuned to a different scale from that of the other four and playing a completely irrelevant melody that prowled around the closed circle of the quartet, hoping to be let in.

No hay arbol que no tenga
Sombra en verano.
No hay niña que no quiera
Tarde o temprano. . . .

"And repeat," Michael said eagerly. "I know that." His own voice joined Campos's, and they sang the verse again. Michael's voice was lighter than Campos's, and more distant; he sang the words clearly and on pitch, but his voice seemed very slightly reduced in scale, like a voice on a telephone. Mr. Rebeck had never heard a ghost sing before. They usually forgot music before they forgot the name of the street on which they had lived, and, once forgotten, the songs were never remembered. But Michael sat with the big Campos and sang a song that Mr. Rebeck did not know, and did not seem in the least aware that he was doing something unusual.

"You seem sad," Laura said beside him. Mr. Rebeck had not known that she was looking at him. He hastily subpoenaed a sleepy smile.

"Not sad. A little puzzled, I suppose. This has been a strange evening, and it takes me a while to get used to new things. But I'm not unhappy or anything like that."

"That's good," Laura said. She hesitated, and then said quickly, "I think I know how you feel."

Mr. Rebeck looked at her, seeing even in the dark her straight-haired, wide-mouthed plainness, and seeing also the beauty that this one night, at least, had made of it without changing it at all.

"Do you?" he asked thoughtfully. "Because I don't, myself."

"I do," Laura said. Michael called her then, and she turned from Mr. Rebeck and added her voice to the chorus of the song. The three of them sang it together, and Mr. Rebeck listened. The song rose up like smoke, rum-colored smoke.

Laura's voice was the best of the three, Mr. Rebeck thought. It was a high, sweet memory, a voice for gardens and riverbanks and vineyards and the celebration of sea birds. She looked at him as she sang, and he closed his eyes and listened to her woman's voice, wise without being knowing. It had been a long time since he had drunk rum and heard a woman singing.

Damn it! he thought so fiercely that for a moment he thought he had spoken the words. Damn it, damn it, what is it I feel? What is it I miss? Am I sad, after all? I don't think I am. Why should I be? Michael's happy. Laura is happy—look at her. Campos is happy, or whatever emotion it is he uses at times like this. Why can I not relax and accept the moment and listen to the singing? What twists in me when they sing?

Michael's voice now, dusty around the edges, but true and sardonic, singing to enjoy himself. And Campos, laughing deeply, his voice heavier than the ghost-voices, harsh with the meaning of the song.

They never sang for me, Mr. Rebeck thought. Perhaps that is what makes me sad, that we never sang together. They came to me for comfort and conversation, they came to play chess and go for walks and simply be near somebody alive. But they sing with this man, and I have never seen them so happy. He taught them a song and now they are singing it with him. Could I have done that, I wonder?

Laura played with the melody as they sang the chorus, tossing it high like a tinsel ball, letting it wink and glitter in the light as it came down to where she waited.

Mr. Rebeck plucked a blade of grass and put it between his lips. It was sour and good to chew on.

Now is it their friendship I want, he wondered, or their dependency? I think it is very important to know. Am I sorry that they can talk to each other and to this man, am I frightened that there will be others like Campos? Am I so dull a man, even to myself, that I fear these others will take my friends from me? Am I so tired and so purposeless that I want to keep them with me forever, living off their need and their loneliness? You can't do that, Jonathan. They are minds, and you cannot make minds dependent on you. That would surely make you the devil.

Cuando se ven queridos,
No corresponden.

They were laughing as they finished the song. Mr. Rebeck lay on his back and applauded. "Bravo," he said. "And brava for Laura."

"Did you catch my harmony on the second chorus?" Michael asked them all. There was no answer. "Don't everybody jump at once."

"Haunting," Laura said dryly.

"Subtle," Mr. Rebeck offered, with the air of a man trying to be both helpful and honest. "Very subtle."

"Fourth-dimensional," Michael said. "But I mustn't chide you for your stupidity. You have no means of comparison, no point of reference. Campos appreciates my harmony. I can tell by his sullen silence."

"What does the song mean?" Mr. Rebeck asked Campos.

The big man shrugged. "Means women are wonderful. Never was a tree without a shadow, a house without dust in the corners, and a woman who didn't love somebody sooner or later. Means men are sons of bitches. Soon as you love them, they run. Don't trust the sons of bitches."

"Simple folk wisdom," Michael said. "Handed down from the Mayans. Close your eyes, dear, and think of England."

"There are a lot of songs like that," Laura said. "All from the woman's point of view. Never trust men, they say. Beware of lovers. All men leave you. The faithful ones just die before they get ready to leave."

"There are just as many songs from a male standpoint," Michael answered, "only they're not sung. They're not funny and they're not beautiful. Love songs have to be one or the other, like people. So nobody ever sings them at Town Hall concerts. But every man knows a few."

"Sing one," Laura challenged him. "Sing one now."

"You have to be in an evil mood to sing one," Michael said, "and I feel rather amiable. Also, you have to sing it when you don't feel like singing, and I feel very much like singing. I'll sing it for you, if you like, but I want you to understand my handicaps."

"May I sing something with you?" Mr. Rebeck asked. "I can't really sing, but I'd like to."

All three stared at him, and he read the look in their eyes as a mixture of embarrassment and amusement. That was foolish, he thought. Why did I do that? I wish I had it back.

Michael spoke first. "Of course you can. Did you think you had to ask?" He turned to Campos. "Teach him 'El Monigote,' the one about the dummy. It takes five minutes to learn."

But Laura spoke quietly. "No. Teach us something new, something none of us knows. That's the best way to learn songs."

"I can't really sing," Mr. Rebeck said again, but Campos interrupted him.

"Know a lullaby," he said loudly. "They sing it to kids. You want to learn it?" The three nodded.

"Simple as hell," Campos said. "Like this." He sang the words deep in his throat, looking far up the road as he sang.

Dormite, niñito, que tengo que hacer,
Laver tus panales, sentar me a comer.
Dormite, niñito, cabeza de ayote,
Si no te dormis, te come el coyote.

"I caught the coyote bit," Michael said. "What's a coyote doing in a lullaby?"

"Like the bogeyman. What it means, sleep, kid, I got to wash your clothes and get something to eat, sleep, kid, little pumpkinhead, if you don't go to sleep, the coyote'll get you."

"Oh, lovely," Michael said. "They know how to raise kids in Cuba. No fooling around."

Campos ignored him. "Then it goes like this."

Arru, arruru,
Arru, arruru,
Arru, arruru,
Arruru, arruru.

Mr. Rebeck started to sing a few notes behind Michael and Laura. He had been afraid that he would not be able to sing at all, and when he heard the first notes of the new voice in the chorus he was so startled that he stopped for a moment. He had known that his voice would sound dry and rusty with disuse, but he found that it was actually painful to sing. His throat was full of sawdust and he could not swallow. His lips felt tight and crusted.

Still singing, Campos reached over and shoved the last bottle of rum into his hand. Mr. Rebeck drank from it and felt the wall of thorns in the back of his throat go down and the song step over it. He drank once more, to wash the last thorns away, handed the bottle back to Campos, and began to sing again.

Arru, arruru,
Arruru, arruru. . . .

When the chorus came to an end, he began to sing it all over again. He sang alone, his voice loud and joyous, losing the tune at once and finding scraps of it as he went along, changing the key when he couldn't hit the top notes. Laura and Michael smiled at each other, and he was sure they were laughing at him. I am making a fool of myself, he thought, but I was born to be a fool and I have had a long enough vacation from being a fool. Of course they are laughing. I would laugh myself if I weren't singing.

But he also thought, Sleep, child, sleep, little pumpkin-head —and he sang the meaningless syllables with his eyes shut because he thought he might stop if he saw them laughing at him.

Then Michael began to sing with him, softly, absently, not looking at him, not looking at anyone. They finished the song together.

Arru, arruru,
Arruru, Arruru.

Michael sang the last note and stopped, but Mr. Rebeck held on to the note as long as he could, until there was no breath in him and he had to let it go.

A black feather dropped into the dim light, and they heard a snort of disgust in the darkness above them. Then the raven plumped down into their midst, beating his wings wildly as if he had just fallen off the wind. He regained his balance, blinked at the four of them, and said, "What the hell is this, group therapy?"

Michael was the first to recover. He pointed at the feather in the grass. "You dropped something, I believe."

The raven looked ruefully down at the lost feather. "I'm a lousy lander," he said. "Never in my life have I made one decent landing."

"Hummingbirds land well," Michael said. "Like helicopters."

"Hummingbirds are great," the raven agreed. "You should have seen me when I found out I wasn't ever going to be a hummingbird. I cried like a baby. Hell of a thing to tell a kid."

"What are you doing up so late?" Mr. Rebeck asked. "It must be four in the morning."

"I'm up early. You're up late. Too hot to sleep, anyway. I was flying around and I heard the glee club. Celebrating something?"

"No," Mr. Rebeck said. "We couldn't sleep either."

The raven cocked his head to look at Campos. "This one I know from somewhere."

"Campos," the big man said. "I'm a terrible guard."

"Yeah," the raven said. "I remember you. I hitched a ride on your truck once."

Campos shrugged. "Ride all you like. Ain't my truck. Belongs to the city."

"Healthy attitude," the raven said.

"He can see Michael and Laura," Mr. Rebeck told the raven. "Like me."

The raven looked from Campos to Mr. Rebeck and back. "Figures. You got the same nutty look."

"What kind of look is that?" Laura asked.

"Half here and half there," the raven answered. "Half in and half out. A nutty look. I know it when I see it."

He turned to Michael. "Latest news and weather forecast. Your old lady's in more trouble than there is in the world."

"Sandra," Michael said. He sat up quickly. "What's happened?"

Laura did not move, but Mr. Rebeck thought that she had become a little more transparent, harder to see. He tried to catch her eye, but she would not look at him.

"The cops found a piece of paper on the floor," the raven said. "Little piece of paper, folded up like a cone. Grains of poison all over it. Everybody's making a big fuss about it."

"Are her fingerprints on it?" Michael asked. He looked hungry, Mr. Rebeck thought, and somehow tired.

"No fingerprints," the raven said. "They figure she held it in a handkerchief when she used it and lost the thing before she could burn it. It was torn off a sheet of typing paper. They're trying to find the rest of the paper now."

Michael sank back slowly. "That's it, then. That's got to be it. It's over."

"Michael," Laura said softly, "drop it. Let it alone. It doesn't matter now."

Michael's voice was fierce and angry. "It matters to me. She's trying to prove I committed suicide. If they let her off, they'll come charging out here with their little shovels and dig me up. Bury me somewhere else, with all the other suicides. Would you like that? Do you want that to happen?"

"No," Laura said. "No. But I don't want her to die."

They stared at each other, ghost and ghost now, oblivious of the two men and the black bird. It was Michael who lowered his eyes first.

"I don't want her to die," he said. "I thought I did, but it doesn't matter. I don't care what happens to her, but I hope she doesn't die."

"Big discovery," the raven grunted. He cackled softly at some private joke. "Her lawyer asked for a postponement. They gave him a week. Trial's on for the fifteenth now."

"They've got her," Michael said without joy. "She must know it. The rest is just ritual. Will you let me know how it goes?"

"Don't nag me," the raven said. "I'll come around again today, after I get a look at the afternoon papers. Anything's in them, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," Michael said.

Campos was sitting cross-legged, with his head tilted far back on his neck, looking straight up into the sky.

"Lose something?" the raven asked him.

Campos lowered his head and rubbed the back of his neck. "Nobody gonna do any flying today. Rain coming."

The raven fell in with the change of subject. "How the hell do you know?"

"No birds singing," Campos said earnestly. "You hear birds singing, it's not gonna rain. Birds don't go out in the rain."

"That," said the raven, "is a large crock. I used to believe that stuff myself. No more. I woke up one morning and it was all gray, like it was going to storm any minute. But I hear the little birds singing and I think, Nah, my feathered friends wouldn't be out there singing if it was going to rain. They know what they're doing. So I went out to get breakfast, and as soon as I was out in the open it rained like hallelujah, brethren. Just sitting up there, waiting until it could get a good shot at me. And those feathered little bastards sang right through it. They sat in trees and sang. I didn't get dry for a week. Never trusted a bird from that day to this. Never going to."

"You don't like birds, do you?" Laura asked. "I've never heard you say a good word for them."

"It's not I don't like them. I just don't trust them. Every damn bird's a little bit nuts."

"You too," Campos muttered. "You too."

"Me too. Me most of all." The raven poked the lost black feather with a yellow claw. Finally he picked it up in his beak and gave it to Mr. Rebeck. "Put it somewhere," he said. Mr. Rebeck put it in his pocket.

"Tell you something," the raven said. "I was flying over the Midwest once." He stopped abruptly, closed his eyes for a moment, opened them, and began again. "I was flying over the Midwest. Iowa or Illinois, or some place like that. And I saw this big damn seagull. Right in the middle of Iowa, a seagull. And he was flying around in big, wide circles, real sweeping circles, the way a seagull flies, flapping his wings just enough to keep on the updrafts. Every time he saw water he'd go flying down toward it, yelling, 'I found it! I found it!' The poor sonofabitch was looking for the ocean. And every time he saw water, he thought that was the ocean. He didn't know anything about ponds or lakes or anything. All the water he ever saw was the ocean. He thought that was all the water there was."

"How did he get into Iowa?" Michael asked.

"Slept past his station," the raven said scornfully. "How do I know? Probably got lost in a storm. Anyway, he just kept flying around, looking for the ocean. Wasn't discouraged, wasn't afraid. He *knew* he was going to find the goddam ocean, and all the ponds and streams didn't bother him a bit. Odds are he's still flying around there. Birds are like that."

He bent his head to scratch among the soft under-feathers on his chest and belly. The stars were going out now, one by one, dropping like pennies behind the television aerials and the skylights and the washing strung between the chimneys. The sky was still dark—a sated, navy-blue woman—but the grass was jittery with the expectation of dawn.

"Did you do anything?" Mr. Rebeck finally asked. "Did you help him?"

"What could I do? What the hell can you do for a seagull in Iowa? I just flew away."

"You should have done something," Laura said. "There must have been something you could do."

"I didn't know where the ocean was, for Christ's sake. I was lost too. What else would I have been doing in Iowa?"

"You're never lost," Laura said. "Surely you could have helped him. You could have done something."

"What? What? Will you tell me what?" The raven's beak clicked like a telegraph key. "That's the goddam trouble with you goddam people. You say, 'Something should have been done. You ought to have done something,' and you figure that leaves you clean. No more responsibilities. Don't take it out on me. I'm stupid. I don't know how to help anybody. I was lost too."

He glared around at all of them, muttering to himself, the golden eyes glowing like the devil's battle decorations, aware and alone.

"All right," Michael said. His voice was very low. "You're right and I'm a hypocrite and I've been one all my life. But that isn't going to stop me from feeling sorry for seagulls."

"It wasn't supposed to," the raven said. He looked away at the pink mouth that was just beginning to open in the east. "Dawn's coming."

"We'll wait," Mr. Rebeck said sleepily. His eyes felt as heavy as ball bearings, and his neck could no longer hold his head erect. "Sing something, Laura. Sing something while we wait for dawn."

"You're half asleep," Laura said. "We'll take you home. You can watch the dawn as we go."

"No. We've sat through the night together. Let's watch the dawn together. It's important." He tried very hard not to yawn and succeeded.

"There's one of them every day," the raven said. "One's like another. You're dead on your feet."

"A singularly tactless image," Michael murmured.

"I'll sing you a song," Laura said to Mr. Rebeck. He could not see her, but her voice was close by. "Lie back, and I'll sing to you. You can watch the dawn lying down."

So Mr. Rebeck lay back and felt the grass crush under his body. He put his hand in the pocket of his bathrobe and clutched the raven's lost feather. The rum has made me sleepy, he thought. I shouldn't have drunk so much, after such a long time. Campos was saying something, but his words were like matches lit in a storm. Mr. Rebeck felt a warm redness behind his closed lids and knew that the sun was beginning to rise.

"Sing now," he said to Laura.

Her laughter was very gentle, laughter to pillow the head. "What shall I sing you? A riddle song? A lullaby? A song for lovers? A song about an early dawn and the sun rising? What will you have me sing?"

Mr. Rebeck began to tell her about the kind of song he wanted, but he fell asleep and so he never saw that particular dawn. There were others, and beautiful they were, with songs to go with them, but in later years he was always sorry for having missed that one dawn. It was the rum, he used to tell himself. You shouldn't have drunk so much. It made you sleepy.

Campos took him home.

X

"DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU," Michael said. "If she doesn't come today, she'll come tomorrow."

"No she won't," Mr. Rebeck answered. They were sitting on the steps of the mausoleum, looking down the short path that led to Central Avenue. "Tomorrow is Sunday. She never comes on a Sunday. I don't know why, but she never does."

Michael slanted a sly glance at him. "At least you know what day it is. I used to see you looking at my grave to remember the year."

Mr. Rebeck scratched aimlessly on the step below him with a pebble. "I don't always remember what day it is. When I do, it's because a day on which Mrs. Klapper comes to visit is very different from a day on which Mrs. Klapper doesn't come. I have two kinds of days now. I only used to have one."

"I only have one," Michael said. "One long one, with subdivision. Don't worry," he added when Mr. Rebeck said nothing. "She'll come today."

"I'm not worrying. She'll come when she feels like it. What time is it?"

Michael laughed. "Damned if I know. Time and Morgan have nothing in common these days."

"One of us ought to know what time it is."

"Well, it's not going to be me," Michael answered. The flatness of Mr. Rebeck's tone had disconcerted him somewhat. "Why do you care? What difference does it make?"

Mr. Rebeck snapped the pebble away from him. "The gates are locked at five. If she comes late she won't be able to stay very long. I hate it when she just comes, says hello, and goes."

"She doesn't have to go right away," Michael said. "Walters usually makes the rounds a couple of times an hour to see if anybody's locked in. She can stay later than five."

"I've asked her. She always has to go home and start dinner." Mr. Rebeck scowled at the hot, shiny sky. "Or she has to babysit for somebody. She loves that. The parents go to the movies, and she sits in the living room and listens to the radio. The next day she spends hours telling me how she put the child to bed and what she did when it woke up in the night and wanted its mother."

"Hasn't she any children of her own?"

"No," Mr. Rebeck said. "A lot of nephews and nieces, though. She comes from a big family." He shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned back on the steps. "She's not going to come today. It's too late."

"Don't panic," Michael said. "She's got time yet." He stood up and took a few steps on the grass. "I think I'll look around for Laura. Maybe we'll come back here later on and tell you a bedtime story."

Mr. Rebeck smiled, stretching his legs in the afternoon sun. "All right. That would be fine." The bedtime story had been a standing joke between them since the morning more than a week ago when Campos, singing and staggering, guided patiently by Michael and Laura and obscenely by the raven, had carried him home, wrapped him in his blankets, and fallen asleep himself on the steps of the mausoleum. Mr. Rebeck had found him there when he woke in the early afternoon, and they had shared breakfast. He had not seen Campos since.

"That was a good night," he said. He liked to think about it. "We ought to spend more nights like that."

"Stick around," Michael said grimly. "We will." He came back to Mr. Rebeck and sat down two steps below him. "I've begun to develop a piddling but useful conception of eternity lately. Listen to me think."

Mr. Rebeck waited, thinking, Of course I'll listen to your thoughts. That's what I do. That's what I am, really, your thoughts and the thoughts of others. He nodded to show Michael that he was listening.

"I had a good time that night, too," Michael said, "but I kept thinking, This is forever. This is forever. You will have this good time again and again, a million times over, until it will be like a play in which you and Laura and a few fugitive lives sit around an imaginary fire and talk and sing songs and love each other and sometimes throw imaginary brands at the eyes blinking beyond the circle of imaginary firelight. And then I thought—and this is where I sounded just like a real philosopher—and even when you admit that you know every line in the play and every song that will be sung, even when you know that this evening spent with friends is pleasant and joyful because you remember it as pleasant and joyful and wouldn't change it for the world, even when you know that anything you feel for these good friends has no more reality than a dream faithfully remembered every night for a thousand years —even then it goes on. Even then it has just begun."

The air was motionless, carved, a block of warm copper fitting neatly around the earth, molded while soft to fit every house and every human being on the earth, and now hardened forever so that no man could move and no air ever came through. The earth rumbled down its alley like a golden bowling ball, shining.

Michael went on. "People used to imagine hell as a place where evil is done and being in hell as having evil things done to you eternally, praise God and don't push; there's plenty of room in the balcony for all the blessed souls. Well, Morgan amplifies this. Hell is forever. Hell is having anything done to you constantly, good or evil. There isn't any good or evil after a few billion millenniums. There's just something happening that has happened before. Think of it—forever. For ever. We don't know what the word means, and we die ignorant and unarmed. Don't ask me to come to any more jolly sessions around the campfire, old friend. I'll come, of course. Wouldn't miss it. Just don't ask me."

He stood up again, moving down the steps and across the grass with the loose, bucking motion of a captive balloon; a manshaped reminiscence, a figment of his own imagination.

"I can't help you," Mr. Rebeck said. He spoke very quietly, but Michael heard him and turned.

"Why, I wasn't asking you to. I wasn't asking for help. I'm very fond of you, but I'd never ask you to help me. I'll never ask anyone to help me again. Say hello to Mrs. Klapper for me."

He walked away and the sun devoured him quickly. Mr. Rebeck sat on the steps of the mausoleum, grateful for the shade the building offered. A cooling breeze sprang up suddenly, making itself audible by shaking the grass and hissing richly in the trees, but it did not reach Mr. Rebeck at all. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it out of his pants, but the breeze was gone and the trees stopped moving. His skin remained oiled with sweat and he could smell the familiar sourness of his own body. Later, when it was dark, he would go down to the lavatory and wash himself. He did not like the liquid soap that you squirted out of a glass jar, but it would have to do.

I am tired, he thought. Maybe the heat is doing it, but I have sat through a good many summers here and never felt like this. I am tired of being helpful. I am tired of being comfortable. Why this should be I do not know, but my image of myself as an understanding old man, floating in kindness like a cherry in a sugared liqueur, is beginning to curl at the corners. I wish something would happen to me, something that would show me exactly how cruel and jealous and vengeful I can be. Then I could go back to gentleness because I chose it over brutality for its own sake, not because I didn't have the courage to be cruel. I might even like cruelty. I doubt very much that I would, but I ought to find out.

He remembered the raven, clacking his beak and saying, "I'm stupid. I don't know how to help anybody. I was lost too."

I believe myself to be good, he thought, and so I can afford to titillate myself by considering evil, like a child frightening himself with horror stories. I am not a bad man. But I am not a wise one, either, nor understanding. And yet, if I lose this rumpled and comfortable skin that I wear, how will I ever find anything to replace it? I wish I were younger and could grow skin easily.

Then Mrs. Klapper called, "Hey, Rebeck!" and he scrambled hastily up from the cellar of his mind, jumped to his feet, and started down the path to meet the woman, who waved as she came toward him. He felt his loose shirt flapping around his waist, and he stuffed it into his trousers as he walked. He buttoned it all the way up to the top and then opened the collar button.

Mrs. Klapper was wearing a blue dress that he had liked on her before, and an irrational crescent moon of a hat that she loved and defended violently. He had become fond of it himself, but that was one of the things he refused to admit to her. Now he prowled around her, hands clasped behind his back and head thrust forward, staring at the hat. She twisted her neck to follow him.

"All right, already," she said. She put one hand up to her head as if to protect the hat from any onslaught he might be contemplating. "I'm wearing it, I'm wearing it. You want I should wear a helmet like Doctor Livingstone? Leave the hat alone, Rebeck."

"It fascinates me," Mr. Rebeck said. He stood with one hand in a hip pocket and the other scratching the back of his head. "I can't take my eyes off it. Do you pin it on?"

"No, I had this jar of library paste, it seemed a shame to waste it. Rebeck, leave me the hat. The hat never hurt you." She was breathing hard and fanning herself ineffectually with her hand. "Hoo, it's hot. Ninety degrees, it says on the radio. Let's go somewhere we could sit down."

"All right," he said. He noticed that she was carrying a light raincoat over her arm. This did not surprise him too much, even in the hot weather. He knew that Mrs. Klapper regarded the weather as about as dependable as bus schedules. Had she lived during an earlier time, she would have propitiated a weather god possessed of a vindictive intelligence and a squad of little helpers that rushed to inform him whenever Mrs. Klapper decided to go somewhere.

As they walked back toward the mausoleum, Mr. Rebeck said, "I thought you weren't coming." He said it as casually as he could, not being by nature a casual man.

"The subway got tied up in a knot," Mrs. Klapper said very quickly. "There was a train in front of us and a train behind us and we were in the middle and nobody was moving and there was a big *tsimmis* with the whistle and the buzzing and the fans didn't work right in the middle. Half an hour we lost, maybe more. So excuse my being late, please."

"I waited all afternoon," Mr. Rebeck said. It was a straight statement of fact, but Mrs. Klapper took it as a mild reproach and an expression of self-pity.

"It's good for you to worry a little. That way you never get fat." She walked as if all roads were sidewalks and every one of them ran uphill. "Anyway, I hurried. Look how I'm panting, like a dog. I run any faster, I'll have a stroke. Then you'll be happy?"

"I'll dance in the streets," Mr. Rebeck said. They had reached the mausoleum, and Mrs. Klapper brushed off the top step as she always did and sat down with a large sigh of contentment. She took off one shoe and began to massage her toes, occasionally wriggling them to see if they were responding to treatment.

"Completely numb," she said, looking up at Mr. Rebeck. "My toes got no more feeling than a salted herring. Also I think I busted an arch. Call the ambulance, Rebeck. Get a stretcher, carry me out of here, what are you standing around for?" She gripped her tortured toes in one hand and crackled them like peanut shells.

Mr. Rebeck stood awkwardly in the presence of the unpretentious femininity involved even in the massaging of toes. Mrs. Klapper's foot, he noticed, was small and clean, marred only by the calluses on the ball and heel that a foot develops if its owner is in the habit of roaming around the house barefooted. An attractive foot, judged simply as a foot. He felt better when she slipped her shoe back on.

"Would you like some water?" he asked.

Mrs. Klapper nodded eagerly. "You got some? Bring it on." She frowned then. "Wait a minute. You got to go all the way back to the gate to get it, forget the whole thing. That thirsty I'm not. Forget it."

Mr. Rebeck smiled and patted her shoulder. "Fear nothing," he said. "I'll be back in a minute."

He left her, ran up the steps of the mausoleum, and emerged a moment later with a little plastic cup. Then he went around the building and walked twenty yards to where a rusty water faucet was set into the lawn near a bank of flowers. He filled the cup there and walked back to the mausoleum, where he presented the cup to Mrs. Klapper with a certain flourish. "I forgot your bouquet," he announced, "but you can take this home with you and raise your own."

Mrs. Klapper wasted no time in badinage. She emptied the cup in three uninhibited gulps, tilted it again to get the last few drops, and said, "Thank you. I didn't know how thirsty I was." Then her face clouded and she looked guiltily at the empty cup.

"*Vey*, Rebeck, I'm such a pig," she mourned. "I was so thirsty I didn't leave you any. Such a pig, Klapper."

"It's all right," Mr. Rebeck said. He sat down beside her. "I didn't want any."

"I tell you what," Mrs. Klapper said. "Tell me where's the water fountain and I'll get you some. Where is it, out back?" She started to get up.

"Don't bother," Mr. Rebeck told her. "Really, I'm not thirsty."

"In weather like this you're not thirsty? Don't be so noble, you'll live longer. I was so thirsty my mouth felt like a double boiler. Don't tell me you're not thirsty, just tell me where's the water fountain."

"Look," Mr. Rebeck said, unconsciously adopting something of her tone of voice, as he always did if she was with him for any length of time. "I live here. The faucet is out back. I can get a drink whenever I want one, whenever I'm thirsty. I was thirsty a few minutes before you came, so I went and got a drink. Now I'm not thirsty. Sit down and stop running back and forth."

"So who was running?" Mrs. Klapper asked, but she sat down again. She sighed. "Rebeck, you're a hard man to do a favor for. You're always one favor ahead. This is no way to keep your friends."

Mr. Rebeck grinned. He felt very relaxed and unworried. "Fortunately—" he began, but Mrs. Klapper cut him off with a sudden yelp of remembrance. "Dope! Idiot! I knew I brought you something. What a dope! Here, for you, a big gift, compliments of the Salvation Army."

Before he could speak, she had dropped her raincoat across his lap. "Here. You catch double pneumonia now, don't come blaming me. I did my best."

Mr. Rebeck blinked down at the coat on his knees. He touched the smooth gray fabric. "This is for me?"

"No, for President Eisenhower. Oh, is that a brain? Sure, for you. I'd bring it all the way out here for me? It's a raincoat, so you shouldn't get wet someday, catch a cold." She laughed, reaching over to turn down the collar of the coat.

"It's a very nice coat," Mr. Rebeck said. He held it up off his lap to look at it. "Only I don't know—"

"Know? What's to know? Sure it's a nice coat, it keeps the rain off, keeps you dry. You think it's going to rain, you carry it with you. It doesn't rain, good you don't need it. But if it starts to rain, you just put it on, there you are. Waterproof."

Mr. Rebeck fingered the coat and did not look at her. "Yes. I know how it works." The unhappiness in his voice finally ate its way through Mrs. Klapper's gaiety. She looked at him in surprise.

"What's the matter?" She snapped her fingers suddenly. "You think maybe it's too big? It's not too big. Here." She took the coat from him. "Stand up, put it on a minute. I'll show you it's not too big."

Mr. Rebeck did not stand up. "No," he said. "It isn't that." He turned his body sideways so that he was sitting on the steps facing her. "Gertrude"—it was only the second or third time in their acquaintance that he had called her by her first name— "I thank you very much, but I can't accept this coat."

The stricken look in her eyes made his stomach contract, even though he knew it would last only about two seconds. During those two seconds Mrs. Klapper was without defenses, and Mr. Rebeck felt guilty and weak. He had never known, and would never learn, how to handle unarmed people.

Then Mrs. Klapper struck back. "You can't accept it? How come? What is it with you, Rebeck? Am I buying your soul? I'm giving you a raincoat. Something's wrong with that?"

"I don't need a raincoat," Mr. Rebeck said.

"What are you, a duck?" Her expressive mouth curved and curled like a catapult, hurling the separate words at him. "You got webbed feet, the water rolls right off your back? What is this, you don't need a raincoat? Everybody in the world needs a raincoat and all of a sudden you don't?"

"It would be a waste," Mr. Rebeck said. "In all the time I've lived here, I've never used a raincoat."

"Then you're a nut," Mrs. Klapper said promptly. "It's bad enough you live in a crazy place like this, but without a raincoat! In twenty years, you never once got caught in the rain? Never once?"

"Of course I did. But there's shelter everywhere around here —trees, mausoleums, the office buildings. I never got really wet." He searched his mind for a proof that would mean something to her. "I've never been sick."

Mrs. Klapper shook her head in disgust at his ignorance. "So you think that means you're never going to get wet, you're never going to get sick? Rebeck, believe me, when you get wet it's going to be right to the skin, when you get sick it'll be triple pneumonia, what'll you do then?" She dropped the raincoat back on his lap. "Look, just carry it around with you, it's such a big effort?" Her eyes brightened as she thought of a possible reason for his refusal of the coat. "You think I need it? I don't need it. I got a million raincoats. I got a closet full of raincoats, I could wear a different one every day. You're not stealing from me."

Mr. Rebeck shook his head. "No, Gertrude." He folded the raincoat neatly and held it out to her. When she would not accept it he put it down between them on the step.

"Thank you very much," he said, knowing that he did not dare to take the raincoat, and wanting desperately to soften the rejection. "It was a wonderful thing to do, Gertrude, but it would be a waste. I don't need it."

"A straitjacket is what you need," Mrs. Klapper answered, but she said it absently, without malice. She smoothed her dress over her knees and smiled suddenly and warmly. "So all right, don't take it. Look at me, turning into a *noodge* in my old age. We'll talk about it later."

"All right," Mrs. Rebeck said. "Later" to Mrs. Klapper could mean anything from two minutes to two years. He hoped, for the sake of his resistance, that it was the latter she meant on this occasion.

Now, without audibly shifting gears, she was off on another subject. "Listen, I was baby-sitting for my brother-in-law last night, the dentist. I told you about him. He wanted to take my sister to Lewisohn Stadium, so he calls me and he says 'Gertrude, you got a free evening, how about keeping an eye on Linda so she doesn't fall out of bed?' Well, his daughter is a doll. Six years old and an absolute doll. Sitting with her is a pleasure, not like with some children. I showed you her picture, didn't I?"

Mr. Rebeck nodded. Surprisingly enough, he had always been able to keep track of Mrs. Klapper's relatives, a thing she herself was not always able to do. More, he enjoyed hearing about them. They were the only people outside the cemetery he knew anything about, and he had decided that he liked them very much, except for the two cousins that Mrs. Klapper couldn't stand.

"So fine," Mrs. Klapper went on. "I came over about six, and my sister and brother went to the concert and I played with Linda. Such a doll, that one, it's a privilege to sit with her. She's supposed to go to bed at seven, but I let her stay up till seven-thirty, we're having such a good time. Anyway, I'm putting her to bed, tucking her in, good night, Linda, and she grabs me and says, 'Tell me a story.' "

Now she was both herself and Linda, switching from character to character, woman to child to woman, with the electric ease of a traffic light changing colors. "A story? All right, God help me, what kind of a story? And she says, 'The little red hen.' Thank God, this one at least I know. I'm the only woman in the world doesn't know 'Sleeping Beauty,' but the little red hen I know like my hand. So I start telling her about the little red hen, she lives on a farm with all the other animals, and she gets it into her head she's got to bake a loaf bread. You know the one I mean?"

"Yes," Mr. Rebeck said. "I can't tell it very well, but I know it."

"Well, I'm going along, I'm telling the story, and suddenly this Linda, she sits up and gives me a big look like you can't trust anybody any more, and she says, 'That's not the little red hen!' Now, she's a lovely girl and all that, but this fairy tale I know, so I say, 'Sure it's the little red hen. Would I lie to you, Linda?' And she says, 'That's not the little red hen!' and I think, *Gevalt*, in a minute she's going to start crying, what'll I do? So I say, 'Okay, maybe there's *two* stories about the little red hen. You tell me the one you know.' So she doesn't cry, thank God, she starts telling me this big story about the little red hen, she's got this deal where she has to lay an egg every day or off with the head, we'll buy our egg from the A & P. A whole story she tells me, I never heard it before, I'm sitting there with my mouth open."

She spread her arms and looked helplessly at Mr. Rebeck. "Rebeck, tell me, are there maybe two stories about the little red hen, or is she making the whole thing up? I don't know. I just sat there."

Mr. Rebeck was laughing. He had begun to laugh midway through the story, accompanied her to the end, and showed no immediate signs of stopping. He laughed quietly and happily, like a man remembering a funny thing that happened a long time ago.

"I only know the story you know," he said when he finally stopped laughing. "I think Linda got it confused with some other fairy tale."

Mrs. Klapper shook her head doubtfully. "She told it like she knew it by heart. She went right straight through it, and, *boom*, she fell asleep." She shook her head again and began to laugh. "Ai, is that a Linda. Next time I come to sit for her, she says, 'Tell me a story,' I'll say, 'Okay, but decide, your way or mine?' "

When they stopped laughing, and they did not stop suddenly, but let it trail away, silence for a moment and then a snort of new laughter from one, in which the other promptly joined, but when the laughter was finally used up, then they looked almost shyly at each other and said nothing. Once Mr. Rebeck chuckled reminiscently to himself, but Mrs. Klapper did not join in again. He looked away from her and had stopped laughing when he looked back. There was still nothing to say. Mrs. Klapper smoothed her dress again with a nervous, patting motion.

"Rebeck," she began, "I was thinking—"

"Why do you always wear gloves?" Mr. Rebeck forestalled her. "I never understood it. How can you wear gloves in weather like this?"

"I bite my nails sometimes." Mrs. Klapper kept her hands firmly in her lap. "Since Morris died, I catch myself biting my nails, like a little girl. I don't know why."

"I was wondering," Mr. Rebeck said.

Mrs. Klapper looked down at her hands. She took a quick, shallow breath. "Rebeck. About the raincoat."

"Are we back to that?" Mr. Rebeck asked sadly. "I thought you said we'd talk about it later."

"So I'm a big liar. Rebeck, I'm asking you, take the raincoat. Do me a favor, take the raincoat. Why make such a big thing out of it?"

"I'm not," Mr. Rebeck said. "You are. Gertrude, let's forget the whole thing. Let's talk about something else. Maybe you could bring some cookies someday. I like cookies, and I haven't had any in years. Now that would be a favor."

He spoke lightly, hoping to make her laugh again, but the effort failed, as he knew it would. He had been afraid that something like this would happen one day, but he had avoided thinking about what he would do when the day came. Forewarned, knowing that something very good in his life was changing, quite possibly for the worse, he blamed himself for being unprepared, for having been always unprepared. He had foreseen every such change in his fortune, ignored it always, and called the refusal innocence.

"I wake up at night," Mrs. Klapper said softly. "I look out the window and it's raining and I think, Rebeck's out there and it's raining on him. What is he, a bum, a thief, he should run around in the rain without even a coat? I lie awake and I worry."

"I wish you wouldn't," Mr. Rebeck said. "You don't have to worry about me. I don't."

"All right, you don't. I worry. Forgive me, I'm an old woman. So I say to myself, What's the matter, you can't give him anything to keep warm? You're bankrupt, you're burning the furniture to cook dinner? Klapper, you've got a house full of raincoats, bring him one and stop losing sleep. So I look around in the closet and I pick out a nice raincoat, and I think, This one looks good, Morris won't mind if I take it to Rebeck, it's clean—" She stopped abruptly, even before Mr. Rebeck spoke.

"Oh," he said, mildly enough. "This was your husband's coat?"

"Sure. What's wrong?" A defensive note had crept into Mrs. Klapper's voice. "Mine wouldn't fit you. Morris's coat is just right, a little big, maybe. It looks brand new. Try it on, see how good it looks." She held it out again. "Try it on."

"I don't want it," Mr. Rebeck said. He pushed it away, without force but completely without gentleness.

"Why? What is this? Something's bad about wearing Morris's raincoat? Tell me, Rebeck. Morris wore it a little, so it's no good?"

"I am not going to wear your husband's clothes," Mr. Rebeck said. "I am not going to wear anybody's clothes but my own. Most of all, I am not going to wear Morris's clothes. Not his raincoat, not his hat, not his pants, not his shoes. Nothing." He spoke faster, getting angrier as he went along. "And while we're talking about it, I am beginning to get tired of hearing about your husband."

"I see," Mrs. Klapper said. A calmer man might have noticed the storm warnings flying over her quiet voice. In all probability Mr. Rebeck, who was a calm man, did notice them and took pleasure in ignoring them.

"The first time you saw me," he said, "you thought I was your husband's ghost. Since then, I've had a lot of moments when I wished I was. We spend most of our time talking about Morris, we visit his mausoleum, which has everything for him except a hot plate in case he gets hungry, we speculate on what he might have become if he hadn't died. You tell me how wonderful he was, you tell me how much like him I look, and now you bring me his clothes to wear."

"His raincoat," Mrs. Klapper said. Her voice was a tight and humming wire. "One raincoat."

"That isn't important. I don't want to look like him, not even a little, and I don't want you ever to mistake me for him again, even for a second. I don't care how wonderful he was—in fact I hope to God that he wasn't as great a man as you think he was. He'd have been unhuman and unbearable."

On an impulse, he took her white-gloved hand in his own and gripped it tightly. "Gertrude, I'm sure he was a fine man, or you wouldn't have married him. He was probably better at a great many things than I, better than most people. But he's dead"—he felt her hand buck and wrench in his, but he held it as tightly as he could—"and it is no honor to the dead to remember them as they were not, to think of them as better than they were. I don't want his clothes or his face. I don't want anything that belongs to him."

Mrs. Klapper pulled her hand free then, as though his hand were a hook from which her own had to be torn with one terrible wrench.

"What do you want?" she cried. "You want me to forget him? You want it to be like there never was any Morris? You want that?"

"No, I don't want that, and you know it. I want you to stop talking about him as if he were alive and listening. I want you to stop kidding yourself!"

"Kidding myself?" Mrs. Klapper's laugh was strident and forced, not so much a laugh as an amplified gasp of anguish. "*I'm* kidding myself?" She swept her arm in an arc that took in all the cemetery they could see from where they sat. "Look who's talking! Look who lives in a grave, like a dead one, and tells me I shouldn't kid myself! Come out of the grave and tell me again, Rebeck."

"That has nothing to do with what I'm saying," Mr. Rebeck said. "Nothing at all. We're not talking about the way I live."

"I'm talking about it!" Mrs. Klapper tapped her chest with a forefinger. "You listen to me a minute, you've got the *chutzpah* to tell me I'm kidding myself. What kind of way is this for a man to live? Since when does a man, a human being, live in a graveyard, eating a couple of sandwiches a day, running around in the night getting soaked to his bones, hiding from people, talking to himself, going crazy alone? You think a man lives like this? You know who lives like this? Animals. Crazy, sad animals. What are you, a crazy animal?"

Mr. Rebeck opened his mouth to speak, but she waved the words back into his throat. "You think this is a good place to hide?" she demanded, pointing at him. "You think maybe you belong here, the dead people are saying, 'Come on in, Rebeck, where you been, we were so worried'? You don't belong here. You could live here a hundred years, you wouldn't belong here. You're a human being, live like a human being, not like a crazy animal hiding in a hole. Don't tell me I'm kidding myself, Rebeck."

Her dark hair had become a little awry, and the foolish crescent hat was skidding slowly over her forehead. Her face was very pale, and her eyes seemed blacker and more angrily alive by contrast. When she spoke again, it was in a quieter voice. The movements of her lips were less definite and less scornful.

"Maybe I do, a little. I wouldn't deny it. Maybe it wasn't always New Year's Eve, being married to Morris. That's not saying he wasn't a great man, understand that. There was nobody like Morris. But all right, so maybe I make it sound a little better than it was, who am I hurting? An old woman remembers things a little bit cockeyed, it's her privilege, she's not hurting anybody, not even herself. But a man tells himself, 'I'm a ghost, I'm a ghost, I'm only happy with dead people,' he's hurting himself, he's hurting his friends. A man should live with men, not in a graveyard where it's cold at night, he's got nothing to keep himself warm. Okay, I'm kidding myself, you're kidding yourself, only it's not the same thing. Don't tell me it's the same thing, because I know better."

"I live here," Mr. Rebeck snapped. They were standing on the steps now, shouting at each other. He could feel the cool, tickling trickles of sweat sliding down his sides under his shirt. "I like it here. This place, this dark city, is as much my home as any place on earth is ever anybody's home. I can't live anywhere else. I tried. I tried for a long time. Now I live here and I'm happy. A man should live where he fits, and if he doesn't fit anywhere he should try to squeeze himself in somewhere where he won't hurt anyone and where nobody will notice him. I've been lucky in finding a place to live, luckier than a lot of men. They're still looking."

"You think this is living? This is eating, nothing else." Mrs. Klapper grabbed at the crescent hat a moment before it fell off her forehead and shoved it to the back of her head, where it remained, tipping from side to side, like a seasick bird. "You're like all those *yentas* where I live, you sit in the sun and wait for your wings to grow. You want to live somewhere, live in a house. That's where people live."

At any other time, Mr. Rebeck would never have taken advantage of the opening she had unwittingly given him, even had he noticed it, which is doubtful. Now he drove through it, his anger tucked like a skull under his arm.

"Is it? Then tell me why you keep calling Morris's mausoleum his big house?"

In the silence they heard the sound of an engine, and they both looked up the path to see the caretakers' pickup truck turning in off Central Avenue. Even at that distance Mr. Rebeck was able to recognize it. It was olive green, for the most part, with rusty fenders and a wide paintless patch on the driver's door—Campos had once managed to get it caught in a funeral motorcade. The engine harrumphed like a congressman, and the rim of the hood was bent up and out on one side, so that the truck wore an impersonal sneer.

Mr. Rebeck was not at first alarmed when he saw the truck, because he associated it with Campos, who loved it and drove it most of the time. But he saw Walters' blond head above the steering wheel and, as he had done so often that he no longer thought of it as running, he fled up the steps to the mausoleum door. There he paused with the iron of the doorknob under his hand and turned, expecting to see Mrs. Klapper's face wrinkled with mockery, waiting to hear her voice, that could be like the bitter shriek of knives against each other, jeering at him. He hoped, in a way, that she would, so that he would not miss her when she did not come again. For he was sure she would not return, and he feared remembering her.

But she only looked at the truck and then at him, and she said quietly, "It's too late, Rebeck. He's seen you. Come back."

And he came down the steps, taking them carefully so as not to stumble, and he stood beside her on the bottom step and waited with her for the oncoming truck.

Walters brought the truck to a hiccuping stop before them and cut the motor. He leaned out of the cab and demanded, "You people together?"

"Yes," Mr. Rebeck answered. He hoped that Walters would not recognize him. They had met twice before, and both times Mr. Rebeck had pretended to be a visitor. He tried vaguely to make his voice different.

"Well, don't you know the place closes at five? It's ten to five now."

"My," Mrs. Klapper marveled. "Look how the time flies. We just got here a minute ago, it seems like." She narrowed her eyes suspiciously and raised a finger at Walters. "You're *sure* it's ten to five?"

"I'm sure, lady," Walters answered, but he looked at his watch. "You don't get down to the gate in a hurry, they'll lock you in. And this ain't no place I'd want to spend the night."

"Well." Mrs. Klapper turned questioningly to Mr. Rebeck. "I guess maybe we better be going, huh?" Mr. Rebeck nodded.

Walters looked at his watch again. "You'll never make it in ten minutes. They'll lock you in. Hop in and I'll give you a ride down. Come on."

Mrs. Klapper glanced quickly at Mr. Rebeck, but no word passed between them. She turned back to Walters and shook her head. "Thanks a lot, but no. You just go and tell the people at the gate we'll be a little bit late, they shouldn't lock up right away."

"Come on, come on," Walters said impatiently. "It'll take you a half-hour to walk it. They ain't going to wait that long for anybody."

"So the night man will let us out," Mrs. Klapper replied calmly. "Anyway, we can't ride with you, thank you. I lost something on the way and we have to find it."

"Yeah? What'd you lose? We got a Lost and Found in the office."

Mr. Rebeck correctly interpreted Mrs. Klapper's look at him as a howl for help. He remembered having said, "Fear nothing" to her in jest, and he wondered if she remembered too. He had thrown it off very lightly.

"A ring," he said. "On the way up here, she lost a very small ring. We're going to look for it on the way back. That's why we want to walk."

Walters slapped his forehead. "Jesus Christ, you can't go looking for a ring now. It'll take you hours, a little thing like a ring. Come back tomorrow."

"It wasn't *that* small a ring," Mrs. Klapper said indignantly. "Do I look like the kind of woman who would wear a little tiny Woolworth ring? We'll find it, and it won't take us so long, either. You just tell the people at the gate not to be in such a hurry, we'll be right along."

"Look, lady—" Walters began, but he did not finish. Mrs. Klapper occasionally had that effect on people, Mr. Rebeck noticed. He felt sorry for Walters.

"Thank you for offering us a ride," he said. "And don't worry. We won't take long."

"Yes, thank you very much," Mrs. Klapper said, as if she were daring Walters to make something of it. "You're a very nice young man."

"Jesus God," Walters said. It sounded almost like a prayer. He turned on the ignition, and the engine snorted with a kind of baleful humor.

"I'll leave the gate unlocked," he said to the steering wheel. "Tell the man at the gate when you leave. Would you do that for me?"

"Certainly," Mr. Rebeck said grandly. "We'd be glad to."

"And watch it with the truck," Mrs. Klapper called as Walters drove away. "Don't go running over the ring, it's very valuable." They watched the truck shudder along the path and out of sight on Central Avenue.

They had intended to laugh when it was safe, fully intended to sit down on the steps and laugh together, louder than they ever had. Neither one had spoken this intention to the other, but it had been completely understood while they were talking to Walters. But they looked warily at each other and remembered that, five minutes before, each had come very near to destroying the other for the other's Own Good. Neither was quite certain that the destruction had not actually been accomplished, and each cautiously watched the other move and did not dare to speak for fear that one might now have no tongue and the other no ears. They moved as if they were wading or picking themselves out of wreckage.

"I better go," Mrs. Klapper said at last. "He's not going to wait forever, whoever's locking the gate. I got to get home, anyway."

"I'll walk part of the way with you," Mr. Rebeck said. She did not answer, and they began to walk toward Central Avenue. Sometimes their shoulders touched.

"You think somebody'll get nervous, they only see one person leave instead of two?"

Mr. Rebeck shook his head. "No. Walters has gone home, and one of the night men has taken over. No one will notice anything."

"You sure know the routine around here. Like a bank robber."

"I have to."

Out on Central Avenue, Mr. Rebeck could feel the heat of the pavement through his thin shoes. He walked with Mrs. Klapper past the frozen fountains of the willow trees and heard, far and very faintly, the guffaw of the pickup's engine. Mrs. Klapper carried the gray raincoat over her arm.

"Rebeck," she said. She took a deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry I made such a big deal about it, about where you live and everything."

"Forget it," Mr. Rebeck said. "Let's forget it. It was nothing." He did not want her to apologize.

"Never mind forget it. What am I, God, a policeman, I can tell you, 'Live here, don't live here'? You live where you want to, it's a free country. You want to live here, it makes you happy, live here. Nobody should tell you where to live. Not me, not anybody. You live where you want to."

"It's just that I feel comfortable here," Mr. Rebeck said. "I never felt that way anywhere else."

"I'm sure it's a very nice place," Mrs. Klapper said. "In the spring and summer, anyway. In the winter—well, what place is nice in the winter?" She looked directly at him. "Only I still worry about you getting wet. You catch a cold here, with no doctor, no drugstore, the next thing you know you're flat on your back. That's why I thought maybe it would be a good idea if I brought the raincoat."

"I couldn't have taken it," Mr. Rebeck said.

"I know, it was Morris's coat, you don't want anything that belonged to Morris. All right, don't take it. Why fight over a raincoat? God forbid anybody should think you look like Morris, it's the end of the world."

"Not anybody. You. I said it the wrong way, and I sounded too heroic about it, but I won't be Morris for you." It was growing a little cooler, he thought. Was tomorrow August? How fast the summer was going.

"If you want to give me a raincoat," he said slowly, "give me one of my own."

Mrs. Klapper stopped walking. "I don't know your *size!*" she protested happily. The look in her eyes delighted him and frightened him at the same time.

"I'm smaller than Morris," Mr. Rebeck said. "Come on, before they lock us in."

"Wonderful, you're smaller than Morris. So now I know." Mrs. Klapper began to walk again. "You think I'm a magician, I can look at you and *boom*, I know what size raincoat you take. Maybe I always carry around with me a measuring tape, it might come in handy? Rebeck, excuse me, about some things you know from nothing."

She was smiling now. It seemed a long time since he had last seen her smile. He felt that he had come to another Crossroads and passed it without even recognizing it as a Crossroads. If he turned around, he could probably see it dwindling behind him, perhaps even run back to it if he began to run now. Once it was out of sight it would be too late; he would never be able to find it.

"I'd better go back," he said. "We'll be at the gate soon."

"Wait a minute. At least let me make a guess what size you take. Stand up straight a little." She looked him over quickly and shrugged. "So I'll get you one that fits like your skin, you'll be sorry you didn't take Morris's coat. Good-by, Rebeck. Don't step on the ring."

She started down the road alone.

Then she stopped and turned back to him. He had not moved.

"Listen, I'll tell you something." She was not smiling. "Remember you asked how come I was late, and I gave you a big deal about the subway and how I had to go back to get the raincoat?" Mr. Rebeck nodded.

"Well, it wasn't like that. I was walking to get to the subway, and I met this woman, I know her from around. I said, 'Hello, how you doing?' She said 'Fine, how come we don't see you around no more?' So I said, 'I been busy,' and she just looked at me and said, 'Busy with what—monkey business?' Rebeck, the way she said it, how she waved her finger and went like this with the eyes. 'Monkey business,' she said, 'I know how it is.' Rebeck, I went home and I lay on the bed for an hour and I said I'm not going out there. No more. What am I, crazy? So I lay like that for an hour, and then I got the raincoat and came out. So that's why I was late."

Central Avenue makes a very wide curve just before it reaches the gate. Mr. Rebeck was able to watch Mrs. Klapper down the road, through the iron gate, and onto the street. He saw her stop to let a car pass her, and then she crossed the street and he could not see her after that. There were a lot of people on the street, and it was not easy to pick out one hat among them all, even if it was shaped like a crescent moon.

XI

IT RAINED all night. Michael and Laura walked through it, watching the rain come down so hard that it bounced when it hit the ground. Toward morning the rain began to let up, and by the time they came to the wall that overlooked the city it had become a heavy mist that sat on the trees and would not be moved by sunrise. Mid-August rain is like that in New York.

"This is nice," Michael said. He stretched, which was, of course, not at all necessary, but it was one of the motions of humanity he remembered very clearly.

"Even though we've done it before?" Laura asked. She sat on the wall beside him.

"Even so. Some things bear more repetition than others. Mornings like this. Grapes. I don't think I could ever have gotten tired of grapes. I used to hoard them. All kinds—green, red, purple, black. Some men can't pass a pool hall without going in. I couldn't pass fruit stores."

"I was that way about bananas," Laura said. "But I wasn't really faithful about it. I'd eat a bunch in a day and then crawl under the sink and be quietly sick. That would cure me for two weeks or so, and then I'd be back on the banana boat. Grapes a little, but bananas most of all."

"Grapes," Michael said firmly. "But you see what I mean. I like this. I like us sitting here and talking, watching the mist burn off and the trucks in the streets. I suppose in a hundred years or a thousand years, I'll be weary unto death with it."

"It won't take that long," Laura said. "A month. Maybe a couple of months."

"All right. I know it. What are you trying to prove? Right now I like watching the morning come. Sandy and I used to do that a lot. We'd sit up all night playing cards and listening to records, and then, just before morning, we'd go out and walk until the sun came up. We'd have breakfast wherever we were and go home and sleep till three or four in the afternoon. Then we'd go through the same routine again, and we never got tired of it."

Laura looked down the hillside as she spoke. "Sometimes I wish Sandra would restrain herself from feather-footing her way into everything we talk about. If I sound petty and malicious, it's because I am."

"I was sorry as soon as I'd mentioned her," Michael said. "I know how it sounds. The most boring thing in the world is another man's girl."

"It isn't that," Laura said a little crossly. "You have a perfect right to talk about her. Every beautiful thing you can remember comes in handy after death. Only—" A plane from La Guardia Airport was thundering tinnily over the city, and she used it as an excuse to leave the sentence incomplete until it was out of sight. Then, still looking away from him, she said, "Only, I wish you'd decide whether you love her or hate her."

"I don't love her," Michael answered. "But all the pleasant things I remember seem to be tied up with her, one way or the other. Not because she was Sandra, but because the good moments were better for someone else's being there. This sounds like women's-magazine philosophy, but some things aren't any good unless they're shared. Sitting up all night would be pointless if somebody you loved wasn't sitting up with you, picking out music to play and helping you kill the bourbon. Walking by yourself in the rain is for college kids who think loneliness makes poets. You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Laura said.

"All right. Let it go. The point is made. You know, the raven was right about birds. They do sing just before rain. I was listening."

Michael looked sideways at her. "What's the matter, Laura? Did I say something wrong?"

"Nothing," Laura said. "Nothing's wrong. When you mentioned Sandra, I started thinking about the trial. It must be over now."

"Now? What are you talking about? It's not for a week yet."

Laura smiled for the first time. "What day is today?"

"Good God, I don't know. It's still summer, but some of the leaves are turning brown already. Is it August?"

"It's August seventeenth," Laura said. "The trial was two days ago. I know because Mr. Rebeck told me. The raven's been following it in the newspapers, the way you asked him to."

"Did I ask him? I don't even remember that. I'm losing all track of time, Laura. I thought I'd keep that a while longer."

Alarm clocks were going off in the city now. One after another, sometimes two or three together, they drove their small silver knives into the body of the great dream that sprawled naked on the housetops. Sensual, amiable, and defenseless as it was, it would still take a little while to die.

"Does it make any difference?" Laura asked. "What's time to us? What's five o'clock to the dead? We've got no pressing appointments."

"No difference. But it's part of being human, and so I hate to lose it. Didn't I tell you I hung on to things?"

"I remember," Laura said. She looked up at the overcast sky for a sign of the raven. "Anyway," she said, "we ought to know about the trial today."

"I don't care about the trial," Michael said. "It might have meant something to me if they'd tried her when I was newly dead and full of revenge. Now I don't much care. I don't even remember her as well as I used to. She's becoming a stranger who did something to a stranger. I don't wish her any harm. Let's leave it at that. Don't talk about the trial, Laura."

Behind them a tree branch shook like a wet dog and sent its load of rain splashing to the ground. Michael and Laura turned and saw a couple coming past the hothouse and toward the wall.

"Company," Michael said. "And so early."

They were very young, Laura thought. Twenty or twenty-one, no more. The boy's hair was so wet it was almost maroon in color. He wore a raincoat but no rubbers, and the bottoms of his pants legs flapped shapelessly above his equally soaked socks as he walked. The girl also wore a raincoat, but the top button was missing and her wet white blouse clung to her small pointed breasts. She wore some sort of plastic kerchief over her hair, but the rain had seeped in, and what could be seen of her hair was limp and damp. They walked slowly, with their arms around each other's waists, faces turned to each other as they talked. Sometimes, without stopping, they kissed and then stumbled because they were not looking where they were going. Then they would laugh.

"Let's get out of here," Michael said. "I don't want to eavesdrop on them. Let's go somewhere else."

"Wait a little. How wet they are, and how happy."

They heard the boy's voice then. "Sure it's crazy. Been a pretty night all around. Look at it this way. I bet you've had hundreds of guys taking you to movies and skating rinks and dances. How many guys ever took you to a graveyard before breakfast? This way you'll remember me."

"A graveyard before breakfast," the girl said. "All night out in the rain and now a graveyard. You bet I'll remember you, mister." But she was laughing as she said it, and she hugged the boy's waist tightly.

"Think of it like a park," the boy said. "Look at all the statues standing around. Look at all the trees. It's like Central Park."

The girl looked up at him and shook her head, pantomiming exasperation. "A park. Some park. Wait till my mother gets hold of me." She made her voice shrill and old. " 'Where were you, Norma, all night and not a word? What kind of a way is that to treat your mother?' And I'll say, 'It's all right, Ma, it's all right, don't panic. Harry and I had a wonderful time. We went to a movie and when we came out it was raining, and so we walked all night. And in the morning Harry took me to the most wonderful graveyard. Ma, you should have been there. What a night.' " She sneezed.

"God bless you," the boy said. "Honey, you all right? I don't want you getting sick because I'm crazy. I'll take you right home now, you don't feel good."

"No, I'm all right," the girl said. "I'll take a hot shower when I get home. Only let's not stay too long, Harry."

"A few minutes, that's all." The boy pointed toward the wall. "Come on, we'll sit down and catch our breath. Then we'll start back."

As they came on together, Michael said urgently, "Laura, let's get out of here. I don't want to watch them. Neither do you."

"Wait," Laura said. "Wait a little. I thought you were the one who spent all his time observing people."

"Not couples. Never couples. I'm not obnoxiously brave, Laura."

"I'm not brave at all," Laura said. But she remained on the wall, watching the boy and girl approach, and Michael stayed with her.

When the couple reached the wall, the boy stooped and lifted the girl onto it. There was a good deal of puffing and giggling and flopping of wet garments involved. Once seated on the wall, the girl extended her hand daintily, and the boy took it and scrambled, panting, up the ladderlike mortar to sit beside her. He was completely out of breath and tried to conceal it by taking deep gasps of air and letting them out slowly. But the girl looked at him and began to laugh, and it was somehow different from laughing after kissing and stumbling.

"Look at you," she said. "You're all red and breathless."

"You think you're such a featherweight?" the boy said, not without rancor. "Come on, we'll do it over and you carry me this time. Let's see how you look."

"Score one for our side," Michael said to Laura. "I think I'm for him if it comes to shooting."

But the boy reached an arm out, and the girl pushed herself against his side and drew the arm about her like a cloak. She giggled once and then kissed the boy's cheek quickly when he looked sourly at her and started to speak.

"I wouldn't make fun of you if you were weak," she said, and the boy's arm tightened around her shoulders until she winced.

They happened to be sitting almost exactly where Michael and Laura had chosen to sit, in the middle of the wall where the trees on both sides did not block their view of the city. To Mr. Rebeck or Campos, the two figures would have seemed outlined in cobweb by the remembered shapes of the ghosts who sat with them; as if Michael and Laura were only sheaths for the young swords that the boy and girl were. But to anyone else passing there would have been just the two young people sitting on the wall, the girl's wet face pressed against the side of the boy's neck.

"I can see where you live from here," the boy said.

The girl lifted her head from his shoulder. "Where, Harry? Where is it?"

"Way over there, see—a block after the Coca-Cola sign. One thing I know, it's where you live."

"I see it. I even see—my God, Harry, there's a light on in the bedroom! God, my mother must be having baby elephants. She'll kill me when I get in, she'll absolutely kill me."

"I'll come up with you," the boy offered diffidently.

"She'll kill you too," the girl warned.

"I'll come up with you. Your mother doesn't scare me."

"Oh, you're so brave," the girl said. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Sleep your life away," the boy said. "Norma, look. The street lights are going out. Look at them."

"This is nice. You can watch the whole city waking up." The girl was tracing the boy's mouth and nose with a forefinger. "The stores'll be opening soon." She sneezed again. "Harry, if I catch a cold you better catch one too. God help you if you don't."

"Isn't that nice?" Michael said. "What's mine is yours. Love is the sweetest thing."

"The way they look at each other," Laura said. "As if one of them was going to vanish any minute, and they didn't know which one it would be."

"Young lust. Don't tell me you've never seen it before?"

"Of course I have," Laura said.

"Take off your shoes," the boy was saying.

The girl pulled away from him, frowning. "Why? What's the idea?"

"Come on, take your shoes off," the boy said. "You're catching a cold."

"I know I'm catching a cold. Is running around barefoot going to make it any better?"

"Look, your feet are wet. Take off your shoes and socks and I'll dry your feet. Then you can wear my socks until we get home. How's that for thinking?"

The girl began to laugh again. "Harry, you're crazy! What good'll that do, wearing your socks? They're just as wet as mine."

"Oh," the boy said. "Yeah." He poked halfheartedly at his own shoes and socks. "All right, forget it. It was just an idea."

"I mean, it's an awfully nice thing to do, Harry, but there wouldn't be any point to it. I'd just get wet again."

"Yeah, I know," the boy said, still examining his feet. "I just liked the idea of you wearing something of mine."

"That's sweet." The girl touched him lightly on the back of the neck, just where the hair begins. "Harry, that's very sweet."

"Forget it. It was a stupid idea."

"Well, look," the girl said. "Look, we could trade coats. Mine might be a little tight on you, but I guess we could manage it. You want to, Harry?"

"No," the boy said. "I didn't mean it like that. Forget it, Norma."

The girl smiled slowly and vaguely, as though she were trying to remember a dream. Her finger and thumb kept gently opening and closing on the back of the boy's neck. "Harry," she said huskily. "Harry, look at me."

"That's it," Michael said. "That's the ballgame. Look into a girl's eyes, and you see everything you ever believed about yourself. And you can never see her ugly because that would mean that you also are ugly and untrue. Up the creek, up the creek. Look at the poor sucker."

"Michael, I'm jealous too," Laura said.

The boy and girl had leaned to kiss each other. Their eyes were shut so tightly that the lids were wrinkled, and it took them a moment to find each other's mouths. They kissed damply and noisily and then sat as close together as they could, hip to hip, arms around each other's shoulders. The girl was still smiling. She nipped at the boy's ear and said, "I think we better go, Harry."

The boy pushed the plastic kerchief back from her head and plowed his fingers through the lank curls. "You've got soft hair," he said.

"Baby-fine hair. I'm the only one in my family who's got it. My mother says my grandmother had hair like that. I don't remember her. Harry, we better go."

Her voice was higher than it had been, and shaky now, for the boy's hand had dropped from her hair to her shoulder, from her shoulder to her waist, and from her waist to her hip, where it remained. There was something tentative about the arch of the fingers, as if their movement or lack of it depended entirely on the girl's reaction. Without even reaching to take the hand off her hip, she slid a little away from it, and the boy promptly let it drop.

"Harry," she said, teasing rather than scolding. "Not in a graveyard."

"Not in a graveyard," the boy said pleasantly. "Not in a living room. Not on a roof. Not in a park. Not in a movie. Not in the middle of the goddam Sahara Desert, right? Right?"

"Don't shout," the girl said. When he would have turned his head from her, she took his chin in her hand and held his hand still. "Harry, it's just that I don't want to spoil this. I don't want something bad to happen to us because one of us got—you know, grabby."

"Grabby! Holy goddam, I touch you through a goddam coat and a dress and whatever kind of suit of armor you wear, and I'm grabby. Jesus."

"Sometimes I'm afraid for us," the girl said. "I really am, Harry."

The boy wrenched his chin free from her hand. "Goddam," he said. "Holy goddam."

"Amen," said Michael.

"Harry, Harry," the girl said. "Turn around and look at me."

"Don't you do it, Harry," Michael warned.

But the boy had turned, and the girl stretched to kiss his forehead. Murmuring, "Harry, Harry, Harry," she drew his head down to her small breasts and held it there, patting his cheek and curling his hair around her fingers.

"My Harry," she whispered. "My poor, greedy Harry."

"And don't baby me, Norma." The boy's voice was somewhat muffled. "Don't baby me. You always do, and I don't like it."

The girl laughed. "Is this babying you?" She held his head even closer against herself.

"Yes," the boy said, but Michael and Laura could barely hear him. He was bent forward at a very awkward angle with his head on the girl's breast, and he kept trying to wiggle his legs and rump into a more comfortable position. He said something else, and the girl bent to listen.

"What did you say, Harry?"

"I love you." She had stopped holding his head, but he did not straighten up.

"I know it. I know you love me."

"We'll, I'm telling you again," the boy said loudly. "I love you, Norma."

"And I love you." She lifted his head, kissed him on the mouth, drew her hand slowly down his cheek, and said, "Let's go, Harry. We'll get some coffee or something and take on my mother. Think you can handle her?"

"Bring her on," the boy said. He jumped from the wall, landing in a deep crouch. Turning and holding out his arms to the girl, he said, "Jump. I'll catch you."

"You sure?" The girl beckoned him closer to the wall. "You won't drop me?"

"I wouldn't drop you," the boy said. "Muscles Harry? Come on, honey. It's all right."

"Okay," the girl said. She slid cautiously off the wall, and the boy caught her and lowered her safely to the ground. He kissed the corner of her mouth and put his arm around her. As they started back toward the hothouse, Michael and Laura heard the boy say, "Nice night, honey?"

"Wonderful," the girl said. "We'll have to do it again."

When they were gone, Michael sighed and said, "Hooked. What an all-purpose weapon the carrot of sex is, in good hands. Poor bugger."

"I think she loves him," Laura said. "She never once took her eyes off him."

"Of course not. When a cat's stalking a nice, fat bird, it isn't interested in the scenery. She knows all about eyes. 'Harry, look at me. Look at me.' Hypnotism combined with mild asphyxiation. When she dragged him down into her breast, he was still fighting. When he came up out of it, he was gone. Beaten. Sure, she loves him. But they've got two different ideas of love. He wants to dance with her on a terrace with a full moon and a thirty-six-piece orchestra; he wants to go singing through storms with her, like Gene Kelly. She knows about thirty-six piece orchestras. You have to feed them, and then there's nothing left for the children."

People were going to work in the city. Almost at the same time, they spilled out of their houses and into the empty streets, getting into cars, waiting for buses, going down into subways, marching along the gray sidewalks. In time the streets, empty a minute ago, full now, would be empty again, as the blotter of the city absorbed the men. And in time it would give some of them, most of them, back, providing that it were wrung enough and squeezed enough and torn enough between now and then.

"I sat like that with a man once," Laura said.

When Michael did not answer, she went on, "I put my arms around him, the way she did, and held him just as she did. Not quite for the same reason, but I held him the way she did and said the same things. Say something quickly, Michael, because I had forgotten this, and I'm saying it as I remember it."

"You never told me," Michael said. "I don't know what to say. Has he ever come here?"

Laura laughed. "Good God, no. That was a long time ago, when we sat together." Again she stopped and waited for some reaction from him. "Say something, Michael."

"What can I say?" He was angry now. "Stop making me your echo chamber. Talk about it, if you want to. You had a lover. Okay. So?"

"A lover," Laura said. "That was the word I used. It's a beautiful word. I was in college then. I used to sit at my desk and close my eyes and say to myself, I have a lover. Laura has a lover. I'd look at all the girls sitting near me in their spring dresses, with their mouths a little open as they listened to whatever it was they were all listening to, and I'd say to them in my mind, When this class is over, some of you will go home, and some of you will go to another class, and some of you will go other places. But I will walk out of the room and go to meet my lover. You have boy friends, dates, steadies. I have a lover. We are different."

"They were probably all thinking the same thing," Michael said. "Speaking as a teacher."

"I know that now. But they'd always had lovers, however they thought of them. This was my first. We sat under a tree one evening, and he got all choky and self-accusing, and told me he wasn't good enough for me. And I put my arms around him—no, I grabbed him around the neck, really—and pressed his face into my inconsequential bosom and went, 'There, there, I love you, don't worry, I love you.' Maybe you're right about that girl, Michael, because I grabbed him as if I'd been lying in wait for a chance to hold him like that. It felt very nice. I think he even cried a little."

In the street below them a mother screamed at her child in wordless rage and love.

"What happened then?"

"He went away in the summer. It lasted a very short time. But it seemed long then, and it still seems long when I think of it. It took the longest time to stop saying 'Laura has a lover' whenever I had a few free minutes."

She moved a little on the wall, as insubstantial and evanescent as poetry, and as lasting. The cars jostled and swirled in the city, bellowing.

"The funny thing is this. Before that spring and ever afterward I used to pride myself on being sensitive and understanding far beyond the range of most people. I marked out the lost and tongueless for my own, and I used to think, I understand them. I know what it is to do a pitiful evil because of knowing oneself unloved. I may be unloved myself, but boy, am I empathetic. Sometimes I even wrote about it."

Michael felt no tightness in his nonexistent throat, and no syrupy flood of pity through himself, but he heard no sound except Laura speaking.

"But for that little while," she said, "I forgot all about the emotionally undernourished. I became arrogant. I was loved, I was one of the haves, and one of the secrets of being a have is not wasting your time on empathy. I gorged myself on being loved until it came out of my ears, and when it was over I didn't realize it for a time because I was living off my fat. Proving—"

She stopped and seemed to be very interested in the cheap headstones at the bottom of the hill, made so much alike and stacked so closely together that a ruler could have been laid across them to the iron gate.

"Proving?" Michael asked quietly.

"Proving nothing. Proving that everyone—meaning me—has her price. Proving that it's easier to love the downtrodden and lonely of the world if you yourself have never been loved. I've been spoiled for it. A man said, 'I love you,' to me. I made him say it a great many times. And so I feel a little above the unloved because of that, until I realize how far above me are the loved and still loving. Forget it, Michael. I'm getting all complicated. But I know what I meant."

She looked away, anywhere but at him, and Michael, looking at her, saw her more clearly than he ever had. He saw the wide mouth and the nose that was all wrong and the eyes that went no more with the other features than the nose and mouth and skin went with one another. He saw the black hair falling across the lowered neck, and even the favorite dress, gray and unbecoming, but so carefully remembered that he could see the weave of the threads and the one loose button in the back. Still no pity, no soupy sorrow, but a feeling very close to tears, a feeling that could not possibly be forced into words without breaking. But he tried, because he was Michael Morgan and he trusted no feeling that could not be spoken.

"I love you," he said.

It sprang from his mouth without editing, and it came out very badly. He emphasized the *I* too much, and what he had said sounded almost truculently protective. He knew how clumsy it must have sounded to Laura.

"Not like that," she said a little sadly. "My mother used to say it like that. I don't want to be defended, Michael."

"I love you," he said again, and it was better this time. "Me. I. Morgan. Not your mother. I love you, Laura."

"I love hearing it," Laura said. "I could never get used to the sound. Say it again. As often as you like."

He was about to say it again when he checked himself. "Meaning that I can say the words as often as I like, but you won't believe them."

"Michael, you don't know me. You've never even really seen me. If we were both alive and we passed each other one day, or you came into my bookshop to buy something, you wouldn't look twice at me. If we were introduced at a party, you'd shake my hand, say 'How do you do, Miss Uh,' and forget me before you were through saying it. You're affectionate, and you're used to being loved, and you're lonely now. Don't practice on me. Don't say you love me because part of being alive is loving someone. It won't make you a living man again, and it won't make death any easier for me."

Funny, he thought. We sit here and talk about emotion in totally emotionless voices, like two neighbors getting whatever little nourishment they can out of fourth-hand gossip. Can we feel things, we dead, or is that also recalled with effort? If she loves me, will I be happy? If she does not, will I be hurt? Will I even know the difference?

"I'd have known you," he said. "I'd have seen you once and known you and married you and lived with you before the party was over."

"What would you have said to me?" Laura asked. " 'Dear Miss Durand, I will love you while I live'? What do you say to me now?"

"I will love you all the days of my death, however few or many they may be. As long as I can remember love, I will love you."

" 'All the days of my death,' " Laura repeated softly. "There aren't many left, Michael. Our minds are like torn pockets. Think of all the things we've forgotten and forget every minute. Why should love be remembered any longer than any of the others?"

"Because we need it more," he said. "Because without it, there is nothing left of us. Loving each other, we last a little longer before we forget even that we lived once. Knowing ourselves loved makes us almost human for a little time."

"Such a little time," Laura said. "It it worth it? Is it worth the effort of loving to stay awake a cigarette longer, to listen to another record? If it can't last long enough to make us wonder if it might last longer, if we know how it must end and when, what's the good of it? I'm tired of hope, and I'm tired of gallant lost causes. Shake your fist in the face of the gods and you draw back a stump. Let it go, and leave me alone."

An ice-cream truck jangled its fool's bells in the city, but only a few children came running because it was too early in the day for ice cream. Over by the housing project, a steam drill coughed and snarled, and the yell of a subway train on a tight curve came faintly through the gratings in the sidewalk. The day must be hot already, Michael thought, for most of the windows that he could see were open, and the workmen had taken off their shirts.

"Nothing's worth any effort in the end," he said to Laura, "because everyone is going to die and there is nothing in the world that will stop them from dying. Nothing lasts. A few things last longer than most people live, but they go too. Hope goes, and desire and wonder and fear and eagerness. Love lasts a few minutes longer, that's all. A minute or a month or an hour. The paper match burns down until it singes your fingers and goes out, and there you are in the dark again, rubbing your two little sticks together. But this is the last time, the last match. There won't be any more light. No more. And no more noise of things moving or of animals lying down. Only our separate, untouching selves, and soon not even that."

"Then we'll sit in the dark," Laura said. "We'll sit and wait."

"Wait for what? Nothing's coming. For God's sake, we spent our whole lives waiting, you and I. Why should anything come to us now that did not come then? There's just this, just this miserable little sketch of love to keep us from being immortal a while longer. Are you ready to be wise, Laura? I'm not. I'd rather love for a day and then be wise, even if it only means saying I love you, as I say it now."

A sparrow flew down and landed on the wall. Laura reached out to stroke its feathers, and when her hand passed through the bird she tried again. She made the useless stroking motion over and over again, until the bird flew away.

"It's whatever we can get, then," she said, "on whatever terms we can get it."

"That's all there is. That's all there ever was."

"I would have taken that once," Laura said, "when I was alive. If a man loved me I would have talked myself into loving him, and I would have loved him very deeply after a while. I can't do that now, Michael. This sounds stupid, even to me, and stupidly proud, but I won't love you simply because you need me. I want you to love me, even for the chip of time we have, but it has to be as Laura. I know it's a little late in the game for that, but I won't be loved because you see death over my shoulder when you look at me."

"Then why did you try to make that stone boy love you because he was alone?" Michael asked gently. "Why did you tell him that he had nobody but you?"

Again he saw the quick shimmer of pain that he had seen in her once or twice before and not recognized.

"That was different. I didn't want him to love me. I wanted him to talk to me and ask me to stay with him for a while. I wanted him to need me."

"All love is rhymed need," Michael said. "I need you. I needed you when I was alive. Where the hell were you then? Now I need you, and you're here, and I love you. I'm selfish about it, like poor greedy Harry. I want to give you things and watch you be pleased by them, and that's the final selfishness. I can't bargain with you, Laura. I've left all my beads and mirrors back home. All I can give you is my need. I'll take whatever you can give me and be pleased with it. I love you, Laura."

"I love you too," Laura said. "Do we sing our duet now?"

"No. Nothing changes."

She moved close to him, and the anguish in the gray eyes and wise mouth was like fishhooks across his mind. "I do love you, Michael. But I wish it could be the way I wanted to love you. I've nothing to give you, the way we are. I can only take from you, and I'll hate myself because of it."

"Don't get carried away," Michael said. "Love me as long as you have need of me. That's the way people love."

"That's not the way I wanted to love. Love to me is giving whatever you have to give to whomever you love. I can't even touch you. Michael, I wish I could touch you. I wish I could sleep with you. I wish I could please you."

Michael grinned at her. "Now you know you're not supposed to think like that. You're supposed to be pure spirit, unperturbed by the desires of the corrupt flesh. The idea is to get rid of the body so as to be free to meditate without being constantly called to the telephone. Be a flame, Laura, be a demure blue flame."

"I'll be that soon enough," Laura said. "What do we do, then, in this short forever we have? How do we love each other? How do we live together and make each other happy?"

"I don't know, exactly," Michael answered. "I think we have to stay together and not wander too far away from each other. There isn't too much we can do for ourselves or each other, Laura, except be in love because it's a little better than not being in love. Does that frighten you?"

"Can the dead be frightened? Even the loving dead?"

"They're more vulnerable. Anything is more vulnerable in love or in rut or whatever than out of it."

"What does frighten me a bit," Laura said, "is being known. We're going to know each other very well before we lose the earth, my love. I used to think how wonderful it would be if people could simply take the roofs off their minds and let other people look in, instead of trusting their souls to words. Now I'm not so sure. I don't know if you'll love me once you know me."

Michael laughed. "I'll take my chances. It's like marriage. The race there is between total knowledge of each other and death. If death comes first, it's considered a successful marriage."

He pointed suddenly into the city. "Look. Aren't they the two who were here this morning? Harry and what's-her-name?"

"Norma," Laura said. She saw the two raincoat-clad figures waiting for a traffic light to change. They had their arms around each other's waists.

"It's too far to tell," she said. "It looks like them."

They watched the couple without speaking until the light changed and the boy and the girl started across the street. They walked so slowly that the light had changed again before they reached the other side, and the cars were sniffing at their ankles.

"Luck, you silly bastards," Michael murmured. "Oh, luck."

He turned in time to catch Laura's smile and looked a little embarrassed. "See?" he said. "You were wrong. Once you feel yourself loved, you become generous, expansive, sentimental. You love everybody, even young couples, and that takes some doing."

Laura smiled and stared happily at him and said nothing.

"I wish I could touch you," he said after a moment. "I think I'd like to hold your face between my hands and look protectively down at you. You'd have very cool skin and light bones against the palms of my hands."

"I'd love it. But I would also flush, and my skin would get hot and very red. It always used to. I wouldn't mind, though, if you didn't."

"I wouldn't mind."

"Big-hearted Morgan," Laura said softly. But she smiled still and sat up straight so that Michael could look at her.

Very suddenly, he said, "Touch me. Try to touch my hand."

"It won't work, Michael." Her voice was very low. "I'll try, if you want me to. I'll break my heart trying. But it won't work. The time for touching is past."

"Try," Michael said. "Please try. Think about it. Think about loving me and wanting to touch me. Think how your hand used to feel, and how you moved it, and what it was like to touch things with it. Stretch out your hand to me, Laura. It might as well be your hand. Big symbol."

"Michael—"

"Once. One try and never again."

He held out his hand, and she reached, without hesitation, to touch it. The sun was hot on the leaves, and the city was full of the noises of cars and children; and Michael and Laura, lovers, reached to hold hands as lovers. There was a point in space where their hands, thin as breath, met and seemed to become one hand, through which the sun shone and a leaf fell. For a little while they stared hopefully at it. Then each gradually lowered his eyes to look at the other eyes with a kind of guilt, but still hoping to see something there that did not look from their own eyes. They did not lower their hands or look away from each other.

"Nothing," Michael said. "I didn't think there'd be."

"I felt something," Laura said, unable to bear the sadness in his voice. "At least I think I did. I might be imagining it—"

"Don't lie to me. Even to please me. We haven't got the time to lie."

"All right," she said. "I didn't feel a thing. It didn't work. We can't ever touch each other. Does honesty make you feel better? It's just as painful as lies to me."

"Never mind, Laura." He let his hand drop to his side. "It doesn't matter."

"It does matter," she cried out. "That's why I can't help envying Sandra, even now. Whatever she took from you, she had at least that much warmth to give you, and I have nothing. Only company and nice words."

"Laura," Michael said. "Laura, Laura. Sandra saw things a little differently. To her, holding each other, sleeping together—that was a kind of taking too. We never made love. I don't know what it was we made, but it wasn't love, and it was always dead by morning."

He laughed. "I'll tell you something. Once I was very fond of a poem by Emily Dickinson or somebody. I only remember one line of it, but it goes, 'The soul selects her own society.' I used to tell it to everybody. Once I quoted it to a friend of mine, and he said, 'Maybe, but the body gets thrown into bed with the goddamnedest people.' I remember him saying that."

He looked at her for a long while, saying nothing. Once he reached as if to try again to touch her, but he drew his hand back so swiftly that she wondered if she had imagined his moving it. Another leaf fell. It would be an early autumn, she thought.

"You are my own society," Michael was saying. "I looked for you when I was alive. I was careless about it, so as not to be hurt too much by not finding you, and I got tossed into the goddamnedest beds when I got too careless, but I looked for you, Laura. For a while I mistook Sandra for you. My apologies. It was dark, and I'm nearsighted. But it was never Sandra I loved. It was never Sandra's arm I slept in."

"Damn you," Laura said. "What kept you so long on the road?"

"My horse broke down, and I had to eat him. Poor beast. Love me?"

"Yes. Very much."

"I love you. Want to go for a walk? The city can dress itself and eat and go to work without us."

"No," she said. "Let's stay here a little longer. We have the time."

The raven came from behind them, and they turned when they heard the harsh flapping of his wings. He landed between them on the wall, caught his breath, and said, "I been looking all over for you, Morgan."

"I've been here," Michael said.

"I've been up and down the damn cemetery. Rebeck said you might be here."

"It's the trial," Laura said. "The trial's over."

"It's over." The raven looked down and scratched his beak in the spaces between the bricks, where the cement bulged.

"How did it go?" Michael asked calmly. "What happened to Sandra?"

"Crazy trial," the raven muttered without looking up. "Craziest damn trial I ever heard of."

"She won," Laura said. "She won, didn't she? They let her go free."

"Darling," Michael said, "you're not supposed to think of trials as being won or lost. The idea is—"

"They let her off," the raven said hoarsely. "Not guilty."

"Good for her. I didn't want anything bad to happen to Sandra. It would have been wrong to kill her."

"Morgan, you don't get the idea." The raven could not meet his eyes. "The way they figure, if she didn't kill you, you did. Suicide. Her lawyer said you tried to frame her. So they're sending a couple of guys out here to dig you up and move you someplace else. You being a Catholic and so on."

Laura made a small high-pitched sound and was still.

"Laura," Michael said. He turned from the raven to speak to her, but after her name he said nothing.

"It was a crazy trial," the raven said. "I told Rebeck, and he thought so too."

XII

"It was the paper did it," the raven said. "They found the other half of the paper."

"What paper?" Mr. Rebeck asked. The four of them were sitting on a small rise of ground from which they could look down on Michael Morgan's grave. The day had become very sunny after the fog burned off, but cool and crossed with breezes. It was the sort of day Mr. Rebeck had always loved.

"The paper the poison was in," Michael said quietly. "I remember now."

"Yeah," the raven said. "You see, they had that little part already, all rolled up like a cone, only it didn't have any fingerprints on it. So, the way the newspapers had it, her lawyer went messing around the house, trying to find the rest of the paper. Really shook the place down."

"Under my desk blotter." Michael seemed very calm. "I put it there for safekeeping. I was going to throw it away, but I must have been too drunk. When are they coming?"

"Don't know. Pretty soon now."

"I don't understand," Mr. Rebeck said. "Why was the paper so important?"

"It had a lot of numbers on it in his handwriting," the raven answered. "I didn't get all that about the numbers, but the handwriting was the big deal."

Michael was sitting cross-legged beside Laura, the way she had seen him for the first time. Frequently he turned his head to look at her, to smile. She sat quite still, eyes fixed on the long pebbly road down which the men would come. He did not speak directly to her, and she did not speak at all.

"The numbers had to do with dosage," he said. "The thing about this kind of poison is that if you take too little of it, it'll only give you an upset stomach, and if you take too much, you'll throw it up. Like an emetic. You have to know just how much to use. I looked it up in a library and wrote it down on the paper. Then, when I wanted something to keep the poison in, I tore the corner off the paper and put the rest of the paper under the blotter because I was in a hurry. And I put the poison in my own glass when Sandra and I drank together before we went to bed. I remember that now."

He raised his head suddenly. "I think I hear something. A car."

Laura looked at him then and started to say something, but it never came out. They sat without words listening for the hissing chatter of pebbles twisting under tires, for voices and the sound of an engine; waiting for a wide nose and a grinning silver mouth to come into sight where the road curved. Mr. Rebeck wanted to hold Laura's hand, or put his hand on Michael's shoulder, but he could not. He found a hole in one of his socks and worked his finger around in it, watching the tear grow bigger.

They waited, but nothing came. There was only the noise of grasshoppers.

"Nothing," Michael said at last. "I must be overeager."

"I can't imagine you killing yourself," Mr. Rebeck said almost wonderingly. "Even now I can't really picture it."

"Nor I," Michael said, "then or now. It's hard to explain, but I never knew I was going to kill myself, not the way we think of knowing—planning it, living with it, waking up in the morning and saying, 'Two days from now I will take poison and die.' That takes something I don't have. Even when I looked up the lethal dosage and wrote it down, it was just for the hell of it, intellectual curiosity. Something to bring up during a lull in the conversation. But I can't remember ever saying to myself, 'Look, I don't want to live any more. I'm going to kill myself as quickly as possible and get the whole thing over with.' I never said that."

He looked at Laura again. "I think that's what Laura can't forgive me. She wants her suicides to be honest with themselves, to choose a death and seek it out boldly. I couldn't do that. I wasn't brave enough or honest enough. Laura is disappointed in me. Perfectly understandable."

"It isn't that at all," Laura said. She did not turn her head. "I haven't the right to ask anybody to be honest. It isn't that. But leaving your death on your wife's doorstep, dying so that she would die—I don't know how to talk myself past that, Michael. If I could, I would."

"Yes. That was bad."

Feeling the need to touch life, Mr. Rebeck reached out and tentatively smoothed the raven's black plumage with his hand. When the bird flinched but did not draw away, he let his hand remain lightly on the dusty feathers. He could feel the raven's heart beating.

"Maybe he didn't know," he said. "It's possible. You do so many things and never know you've done them. He didn't know Sandra would be blamed for his death."

Michael shook his head. "I knew. Thank you just the same." He did not look at any of them, nor was he looking down the road. He seemed to be staring with great interest at a white cloud shaped like a horse's head.

"I knew," he said. "There isn't any real way around it. I felt that Sandy had driven me to suicide, and that it was only right that she suffer for it. Funny that I should become such a great believer in justice. I always used to open my history courses by telling the students that if they expected to hear a series of movie scenarios, with the good guys winning in the end, they might as well all go home because not only didn't the good guys win, but there weren't any good guys."

"They have to go to college to learn that?" the raven asked. "Hell, birds know it before they know they're birds."

"People know it too," Michael said, "but it worries them a bit, and they like to avoid the whole subject. I used to tell my classes, 'There is no justice. Justice is a man-made concept, a foreign body in the universe. Tigers are neither just nor unjust when they kill goats, or men, for that matter. There is no such thing as abstract justice. There is such a thing as law. The difference should be apparent.' It's old stuff, not in the least original with Morgan, but the students were very impressed."

Laura said nothing, and Michael sighed. "What can I tell you, Laura? That I confused justice and revenge? People do that a great deal, and they always have. That's no excuse. I never admitted that I thought my wife ought to die for causing my death, but that was the idea. It seemed very fair."

"And all your anger at death," Laura said. "Was that a lie? All the struggling to stay close to life, and all the crying that Sandra had murdered you—did you know all the time?"

"No. Not until the raven came. I didn't remember anything about my death. Only that there was poison and that it had a lot to do with Sandra. That was all."

Still Laura bent her head and would not look at him, and suddenly Michael was shouting. "God damn it, how do you think I feel?" His voice tolled in Mr. Rebeck's head, and it hurt the small man to listen. There seemed to be a great pendulum swinging sluggishly inside his head.

"How do you think I feel, knowing that I was bored enough with myself to stop myself, and vengeful enough to try to drag someone with me? Knowing nakedly, without any possible way of shading my eyes from it, that I'm a liar, and a coward, and a murderer in everything but deed? Knowing that I never loved Sandra, and tried to destroy her because she didn't love me? And I planned it. I planned the whole rickety, childish, murderous thing, and then forgot all about it because it didn't go with the picture I had of myself. God, what a man I was. How I must have hated."

"I wouldn't bang my head on the floor quite that much," the raven said. "Nothing you can do about it now. Anyway, they let her off. Happy ending. The rest doesn't matter."

Michael shook his head. "It matters. How it ends isn't important any more." His voice was quieter. "Funny to find out I didn't love Sandra. I always thought I did."

Mr. Rebeck felt the raven's compact body moving under his hand and thought, I wish this had not happened. With all my heart, I wish it were June again, late spring, before the heat came, and none of this had happened. He saw Laura gradually raise her eyes to Michael's eyes, and knew without surprise what had happened between them that morning. I suppose it is a wonderful thing, he thought, even a kind of miracle, but I cannot seem to react to it properly. I am too old for sudden beauty, beauty that is born without budding and dies without bearing. What will happen to them now?

Oh, I wish to God it were spring again, late spring, before the heat came.

Michael's voice was low as he spoke to Laura. "The chase is over. The Morgan-hunt is over. I know what I am. I am everything I feared in life, everything I hated in other people, falseness and brutality and mindless arrogance. And I have to drag them with me, wherever I am dragged, because they are part of me, skin and skeleton. I can never hide from them again."

"That's not true," Laura said. "You're kind, and gentle, and no more evil than breakfast or sunset. Don't you think I know?"

"No. I don't think you do know, Laura, because I didn't myself until just now. I can't fall back on kindness now that nothing else is left. When I was young, I thought I was very kind. I thought that I hated meanness and brutality simply because they were evil in themselves. As I grew up I learned that I hated to see people in pain because I could imagine myself suffering in their places. I always had a very good imagination. Now I see that I made great gestures against these things because they were in me, and I knew it and didn't dare admit it."

"They're in all of us," Laura said desperately. "They're in me. Michael, listen."

Michael went on. "So I told myself that I was kind and gentle, and other people believed it, and I even believed myself, and look at this thing I've done, Laura. Look at what I've done."

This time they all heard the sound of the truck and knew that the men had come even before they saw the truck. Mr. Rebeck had expected one of the shining black hearses with long tonneaus and shaded windows that he had so often seen sliding along the roads of the cemetery. But what came to get Michael was a large, open-backed truck with a green cab that gleamed as if it had been painted that morning. There were four men, three sitting in front and one in the back, leaning against a rusty red winch that stood up like the fin of a lean fish. The truck's engine was oddly soft and muffled, even when it was very close.

"They'll see me," Mr. Rebeck said. He drew his legs under him to rise, but the raven nudged his hand and said, "Not unless you get up. Stay put." He relaxed, feeling a little ashamed of his fright, but glad that the men would not see him.

"Do something," Laura said to Mr. Rebeck, to the raven, to Michael. She kept looking from Michael to the oncoming truck and back. "Please do something."

The truck was moving very slowly now. One of the men in the cab had stuck his head out of the window and was looking at the graves as the truck passed them.

"There's nothing they can do," Michael said. "The time for doing something, like the time for touching and the time for being kind, is past. Anyway, it's not everybody who gets to see himself dug up." He essayed a frown. "Dug up. I don't like putting it that way. Exhumed. That's no good either. Disinterred. Jesus."

"Excavated," the raven said. "Mined. How about mined?"

"Mined is very good."

Mr. Rebeck heard a wordless shout from the man with his head out of the window, and the truck scraped to a halt.

"Bingo," Michael murmured. "Our side wins the treasure hunt."

The four men got out of the car and stood around the grave. They were wearing clean dungarees and heavy shoes. The driver went to the back of the truck and returned with four shovels. Mr. Rebeck had thought vaguely that there would be picks, but it was summer and the ground was soft. They would have no trouble with the earth.

One of the men lifted his shovel, held it high a moment, shifting his grip, and then struck it into the earth at the foot of the grave. He put his foot on the shovel to drive it in deeper. When he wrenched it free, tossing the dirt to one side with a quick flip, there was a dark brown gash in the middle of the grasses.

"Oh, God," Laura said softly. She turned suddenly to Mr. Rebeck, her imploring shadowiness very close to him. "Do something," she said. "You must do something."

She is beautiful, after all, Mr. Rebeck thought, and I never noticed. But why does she turn to me? Why to me? I can't do anything.

Michael said it for him. "There's nothing, Laura. What do you want him to do? Would you have him go charging down the hill, yelling, 'Unhand that specter! If you take him away, I won't have anybody to talk to'? There's nothing to be done. What's the good of yelling?"

Nothing at all, Mr. Rebeck thought. But there must be yelling. There ought to be a good deal of yelling and fist-shaking and cursing, for how will we know we are alive if there is no noise?

Laura, Laura, for your sake I might be a little brave and go running down at those men, cursing them very loudly and telling them to leave Michael alone. That doesn't take too much bravery. But when I ran out of curses, when they saw how small I am, they would look at each other and laugh and go on digging. They might even dig me up. I am not brave enough for that, and no one can convince me that I am.

The first man nodded at another, and this man also plunged his shovel into the ground until only a thin flake of blade showed. They dug together, one at the foot of the grave and one at the side, while the two other men leaned on their shovels and talked to each other. The broad-leafed ivy on Michael's grave was ripped from its tentative hold on the earth and shoveled casually to one side, where it lay like a worn bedspread. For a moment the grave was outlined, a dark brown oblong in the grass, black-wounded where the shovels had struck.

"The ivy didn't even have time to take," Michael said. "It looked very thick and protective, but the poor damn thing probably hadn't even taken root. Poor old hothouse ivy. I wish they'd get it over with. How long does a thing like this usually take?"

"I don't know," Mr. Rebeck said. "I never saw it before."

The raven's head was small and surprisingly hard under Mr. Rebeck's fingers. He had read once that birds' bones were as light and fragile as the glass balls on Christmas trees.

The bird said, "I've seen a couple. Half an hour. Maybe less, maybe more. Depends how much trouble they have getting the coffin into the truck. That's what they have the winch for."

"Half an hour," Michael said. "Thank you. Could you manage to love me for half an hour more, Laura?"

The men were working very fast. They were beginning to stoop as they dug on the grave and threw the dirt over their shoulders. Already two straggly wings of earth spread away from the grave.

"Is that all you want?" Laura asked quietly. "Half an hour of my love?"

"It's all I'm going to get, so it's all I want. I believe in rationalizing before the fact. But I need that half-hour very badly, Laura."

"All right, Michael. Half an hour."

"Give or take a little. Maybe they'll have trouble with the winch. How fast they dig."

As he spoke, the two men stopped digging and the hitherto idle pair took over. They dug eagerly, barely allowing themselves time to spill the dirt away before their blades were in the ground again. One had taken his shirt off and could be seen to bare his upper teeth in an abstracted grin at every lunge and twist of his shovel. The two relieved men dabbed at their foreheads and necks and drank sparingly from a nearby faucet.

"I wonder what happens when they're finished," Michael said. "Probably nothing until they drive out of the cemetery. Then what?" He glanced inquiringly at Mr. Rebeck.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Mr. Rebeck repeated. "I don't know what happens."

"That's true. I don't imagine you would. Well, it doesn't matter. They can't make me any more dead or any less. That was a mistake of mine. I would like to know where they're taking me, though."

"Mount Merrill," the raven said. "A little place way down at the butt end of the Bronx. They get all the Yorkchester rejects. Your old lady made the arrangements."

"Pleasant name. Alliterative." Michael did not appear to have noticed the raven's last remark. "You know, if you stop to think of it, this—mining operation shouldn't affect me very much. It isn't as if I'm actually leaving anyone I haven't left already. Except Laura. Always excepting Laura."

He turned quickly to Mr. Rebeck. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Jonathan." He had never called Mr. Rebeck that before. "We've been friends here. We would have been friends if we'd known each other when I was alive. We might have grown old playing pinochle, and the children would have been forcibly encouraged to call you Uncle Jonathan. But, as man and ghost, we had only a little time left to be friends. You know that. It was like the red second of light that remains after you have switched off a lamp. That short."

Very suddenly, Michael's tombstone began to fall. Mr. Rebeck heard one of the standing men shout a warning and saw the two diggers scramble out of the grave as the stone moved above them. Like the ivy, it had not had time to settle into the ground, and now it toppled slowly forward, crumpling the little earth that still held it up, making no sound at all. It swayed for a moment before it fell and vanished into the shallow hole that the men had dug. The four watching on the hillside heard the flat sound it made on the earth, and Mr. Rebeck thought he detected a slight hollowness under the sound. The shovels could not have much farther to go.

Laura said, "Ah," as if the stone had fallen on her. The men stood around the grave, looking at one another.

"What a sound," Michael marveled. "Like a suitcase slamming shut. Very symbolic. Even the stone cries out. Well, it should give us a little more time. I'm grateful for it."

They watched as the shirtless man waved the others back and jumped into the grave. He rubbed his hands against his thighs and bent down to the stone. Mr. Rebeck could see only the man's broad brown back from where he sat, but he could hear the whistling grunts of effort that burst past the man's teeth as he struggled with the headstone, and see the prison stripes of dirt and sweat forming on his sides. There was a moment when he almost had it lifted; when he stood nearly erect, with his shoulders curved and neck thrust forward, and his arms hanging straight down, a bowstring to his sweating back, and the stone in his hands, clear of the ground. His elbows were scraped and very dirty.

Then they heard the stone fall again, and saw the man straighten up slowly, rubbing his back and opening his mouth in pain. The man who had driven the truck grinned at him, a grin full of triumph and sympathy, and leaped down into the grave to join him. He stood opposite the shirtless man and said clearly, "You got to squat." So they both squatted on their haunches until only their heads showed out of the grave, and together they gripped the stone and lifted it as they rose. They dropped it on the grass and climbed out of the grave, breathing hard and laughing in deep gasps. The other two men took up shovels and began to dig once more.

"That's it," Michael said. "That's the true last of Morgan. The body in the coffin that they're trying so hard to reach doesn't matter at all. All bodies are alike. But when the stone with my name on it went over, old Morgan went too. Everybody should have a stone with his name on it. Also the dates of his birth and death. I haven't got one. Pat down the earth and let the grass grow back. Morgan is finished."

"They always take the stone with them," the raven said. "They'll put it up again in Mount Merrill."

Michael did not answer. He was watching the men. Mr.

Rebeck watched them too, feeling more and more nervous. Now he did not wish for spring. He only wished himself away from the hillside and the grave that was being opened as eagerly as an unexpected present.

"It isn't fair." Laura's voice was sad and childlike. "It isn't fair."

"What's fair?" Michael asked gently. "Nobody's doing this to me. I did it myself. I must have wanted it once. Hush, Laura. Don't cry."

"I'm not crying. I'm a ghost."

"Don't argue with me. I know when you're crying. I love you. I know everything about you."

The grave had grown very deep. The smallest of the men stood in it up to his shoulders as he added his shovel loads to the great pile of dirt at the foot of the grave. When he bent over to dig he could not be seen at all.

Michael said, "Maybe this is the right way. We've loved each other for half a night and half a day and been warmed a little. What more could there have been for late lovers like us? Even if we had only the half-hour I asked you for, we'd have loved longer than people do in whole lifetimes. People love for scattered minutes: five minutes here, a minute with this girl, two minutes in a subway with another girl. We know how to love. We practiced in our minds, thinking, This is how I will love if anyone ever asks me. And now we've had a morning of love. How much more is there, ever, for the living or the dead?"

"Much more," Laura said fiercely. "You don't believe a word of what you've said. You haven't even been listening to yourself. Don't try to comfort me. I don't want comfort, Michael. I don't want a tiny, perfect love. I want you. I want you for as long as I can have you, and I know the difference between a half-hour and a lifetime."

"Laura—" Michael began. But she had turned swiftly to Mr. Rebeck, her beautiful, utterly plain face commanding his eyes.

"Is that unghostlike?" she demanded of him. "I don't feel very much like a ghost. I feel greedy and human. Am I wrong not to resign myself and make the best of things, accepting the beauty in loss? Am I wrong to want more than I have? Tell me. I want to know."

How did I ever think that she had the voice of a sad child? Mr. Rebeck wondered. The voice I hear is the voice of a proud and anguished woman. What is a woman doing in this place? What can I tell her? Why should she listen to me? I wouldn't, if I had any choice.

"No," he said. "Who am I to tell you not to want anything? But I know what Michael meant. There is a kind of love that can only be spoiled by consummation."

That wasn't what you meant, was it? No. No, I didn't think so. If you didn't take the things you want to say so seriously you might get a few of them right. Feel the raven laughing under your hand.

He decided to tell them about the girl. If he could remember. He would have to speak carefully.

"Once I went somewhere with a girl, when I was a long time younger. It was in the evening. I don't remember where we went, but I know that other people were there too. And somehow we were alone, this girl and I, in a very big room with a high roof and no chairs. We could hear the other people in the next room."

You sound like an old man telling the only dirty story he knows. Put in the cello quickly, because the story is really about the cello and not about you.

"There was a cello leaning against the wall. It looked old, and one of the strings was missing. But we went over to it, and we touched it and picked out tunes on the three strings. Once in a while we would look at each other and smile, and once our hands touched when we were both playing with the cello at the same time. We stayed there for a long while, telling each other jokes in an Irish brogue, and plucking the strings of the cello. Then some of the other people began to come into the room, and we went outside on a terrace."

Just then the shovels found the coffin. There was a short sound of metal on wood, and then another. All the men shouted in triumph, and the shirtless man, who was not digging, waved his shovel over his head. The other shovels rasped up and down the coffin, clearing away the few remaining clods, and the driver slapped the shirtless man on the back and went to the truck.

"Not much time left," Michael said.

"Some," the raven answered. "They still got to get the chains onto it and fill in the dirt after they're through."

"I wouldn't know what to do with much more time. All the time they were lifting up that headstone, I kept thinking, 'Here's a gift of five minutes, maybe more, surely time enough to say something important to Laura or explain myself to myself.' But nothing came out. Not a word. I love you, my

Laura, but I never said anything important in my life, and I am not about to start now."

I must finish the story, Mr. Rebeck thought. I am not as honest as Michael; I must believe that whatever I am saying is important and should not be left incomplete. Finish the story, then, but do not blame them if they do not listen to you. They know what is important and what is not.

"In the moment that the girl and I stood in the room, playing with the cello and making jokes, we loved each other as much as we ever could have. When we went out into the garden it was not the same thing. And after a while we went away from each other, because both of us knew that it could never be as good again as it had been in the room with the cello. We had spent all our love in those few minutes, and what came after that was only remembering and trying to make it the way it was before."

The driver had backed the truck to the edge of the grave, and a chain was rattling down the winch, sounding very much like silverware in the sink. The shirtless man reached into the back of the truck and drew out two coils of rope. He tossed one of them to another man, and they both climbed back into the grave, letting themselves down very carefully, because it was a long way down and it would be easy to fall and get hurt.

Laura was moving more and more restlessly now on the small hill. Her eyes were huge; they hurried back and forth in her face like trapped and panicky squirrels in a cage too small for them. They moved from Michael to Mr. Rebeck's carved silence, to the raven's pirate-treasure eyes and sharp yellow beak, to the men in the grave, bending to tie their ropes around the coffin, and back to Michael. Always back to Michael. She sat as close to him as she could.

"They work so fast," she said. "Why are they in such a hurry? I can't stand watching them."

"Don't watch them, then," Michael said. "Watch me. What are you doing with your eyes away from me?"

"Michael, there must be something we can do. There must be something."

"No. There's no way, Laura. There's nothing but looking at each other and hoping that we remember each other's faces after we have forgotten our own."

The two men moved in the grave, and now and then the third man shouted their progress to the driver. Laura sat close to Michael and watched them. Whenever their heads and shoulders rose out of the grave, she knew that they must be standing on the coffin.

"We'll forget," she said bitterly. "As soon as you're gone, I'll forget you and die. And you'll forget me."

"What can I tell you? That my love for you is so great it will burn the black gates between us to ashes? That we'll meet again and know each other in that Great Ellis Island in the sky? That I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way? You know better than that, Laura. I love you, more, I think, than I know, but our kind of love isn't a sword. It's a light. Not a fire. A small light, just bright enough to read love letters by and keep the animals at a growling distance. In time it will go out. All lights go out. So do all fires, if it's any comfort. Love me, and look at me, and remember me, as I'll remember you. There's nothing more. Sit close and shut up."

The winch motor rumbled like a giant's belly, and the bright chain dipped leisurely into the grave. The shirtless man seized it in both hands with a kind of fierce affection, and he and the other man became very busy attaching it to the ropes that ran around the coffin. This took a few minutes, during which Michael and Laura looked at each other and not at the grave, and the winch idled, mumbling obsolete curses to itself.

Then the watcher between the grave and the green truck yelled something to the two men, and they came scratching out of the deep hole. The third man gave his hand to each of them and pulled them over the edge, one after the other. They did not stop to laugh or breathe deeply, but staggered a good ten feet from the grave before they finally sat down on the grass and waved to the driver in the cab of the truck. They were covered with sweat and streaked with the dark dirt of the grave.

The chain went taut and trembling. For a moment, nothing moved. There was only the noise of the winch; there was no other sound. Even the grasshoppers were silent.

Laura started to make a sound that might have turned out a whimper, but she broke it off so quickly that no more than half of it came out.

The raven crunched a silent grasshopper in his beak, and that was definitely a sound.

At that moment the hungry whine of the winch rose to a wintry howl of triumph. The whole truck shuddered under the sound. The chain rattled like a loose fiddle string, and the coffin began to rise slowly out of the grave, banging against the sides of the hole and sending soft showers of dirt sliding down into the grave. The men beside the truck bit their fingers and waited.

Laura made the "Ah" sound again, and Michael said, "Hush, Laura, hush, darling." The coffin rose clumsily, the front higher than the rear, and the whole thing canted over on one side. But it cleared the grave, and the winch howled louder than ever. A great clod of earth fell from the coffin and splashed into darkness at the bottom of the grave.

"Like pulling a tooth," Michael said. "It's exactly like pulling a tooth."

When the coffin was well above the grave, the driver shut off the motor. The coffin swung high and black, and the sun glinted off its silver handles and small silver name plate. The chain creaked a little, and the ropes fretted against the corners of the coffin.

Michael rose to his feet with a strange grace and stood with his hands at his sides and his head tilted to see the hanging coffin. The motor started again, and the winch deposited the coffin by its side in the back of the truck. One of the men went over to unhitch the chain and shove the coffin farther back in the truck. And Michael nodded, and nodded again.

Then he turned back to Laura and said quietly, "I think I'd better go now."

He gave her no time to reply. Trying to avoid her eyes, he went over to Mr. Rebeck and said, "Good-by, Jonathan. I'll miss you very much. Take care of yourself and talk to Campos when you get lonesome. The living are wonderful company at times."

Mr. Rebeck had barely time to begin a puzzled "Good-by," when Laura burst between them and stood facing Michael, crying out, "No! It isn't time yet, you don't have to go! No, Michael!"

"I might as well, Laura. They're going. It'll be easier if I go when they do."

"But it isn't time," she said desperately. "Stay, Michael, please. They aren't ready to go."

Mr. Rebeck said hesitantly, "They have to fill in the grave. That will take a little time."

"Don't," Michael said to both of them. "Don't do that. I have to go. It's better if I go now."

"God damn you," Laura cried, and her voice was ugly with sorrow. "Will you for once stop being so brave? Will you please get your gallant chin out of the air, and lose your dignity, your goddam new-found dignity? Will you do me the honor, my dearest love, of breaking down just a little? Do that for me, Michael. I want to remember you the way I am, immature and uncivilized, without pride, and crying."

Michael stood close to her and said, "This isn't bravery or dignity. I was never brave or dignified, not once. This is cowardice again. This is the easy way out. I have no courage, and my sadness is not graceful. I can't say good-by, and I want to go before I have to say it."

"Stay with me," Laura said again. "As long as there's a minute left, stay with me. You don't have to go until they pass the gate. Stay with me until then."

"I can't, my Laura. Forgive me. I can't stay."

Deeply embarrassed, feeling like an eavesdropper even though they paid no attention to him, Mr. Rebeck stroked the raven's rough feathers and watched the men spilling the dirt back into the grave. Three of them worked at the same time, lifting the earth, tossing it, packing it down. They worked lazily, talking to one another, as if they had sweated away the taloned need and eagerness that had attended on the removal of the coffin. Nevertheless, even as he watched them, they finished filling up the hole in the ground. The surface dipped a little, because there wasn't quite enough earth to fill it up completely. The coffin had taken up a lot of space. One of the men was patting down the dirt with his shovel; the other two crouched to lift the headstone and put it in the back of the truck, next to the coffin. The driver stuck his head out of the window and watched the men work.

"I can't bear to sit and lose you and not be able to do anything about it," Michael said. "I haven't the courage. I'd wait with you if I dared, Laura, and say wise and warming things to you, and all the time I'd be thinking, *Five minutes, four minutes, up a hill, down a hill, through the willows, now the road curves, now the bleak gate stands open, what can I say to her, what can I say? There must be something I can tell her, something that makes our losing each other good and meaningful, something that will make some sense out of this sad, stupid thing.* And then I'd think *Two minutes, one minute, the gate is open,* and I'd say, 'I love you, Laura,' over and over, until I was gone."

"That's meaningful. What has more meaning than that? Stay with me, Michael."

"I can't," Michael said. "I haven't changed. Dying and loving haven't made me brave and gallant. I'm still Morgan, dead Morgan. Let me go, let me be done with it."

The men threw their shovels into the truck and climbed in themselves, three in the front and one in the back, as they had come. The engine made the truck shiver and the shovels clank against each other, and the man in the back braced his feet against the coffin. Then the truck drove away, and the last they saw of it as it rounded the curve was the lean red winch with the brown spots where the paint had flaked off, and the lone man sitting in the back.

"I'm going now," Michael said.

"I love you," Laura said hopelessly. "I'd love you if you were afraid of everything in the world."

"I am. Except of being alone. I love you, Laura."

Again he said good-by to Mr. Rebeck, and then he turned and walked down the hill toward the patch of dark earth with the torn ivy strewn all around it. He was a lightly sketched figure, with no color of his own, but he was the color of the grass and the loose earth of the grave, and the color of the pebbles on the road. The sun shone through him, and he was that color too. He did not turn, and he did not look back. But he stopped twice and stood still with his shoulders hunched before he walked on.

"He wants to turn back," Laura said. "If I called him again, he would come back."

"Call him, then," Mr. Rebeck said with his head down.

"No. Because he might not turn, after all, and I don't think I could stand that."

She moved up and down, not a ribbon any more but a veil; and not beautiful any more, if she ever had been. She watched Michael pass by the empty grave, over which the grass would grow soon, and, watching, said, "Oh, God, God, what will I do?" Mr. Rebeck remembered the same voice singing to him long ago, before somebody's sun rose, and he knew that this too was singing. The raven was silent, not looking at anything in particular.

And then suddenly Laura stood still, so still that Mr. Rebeck was sure that she had seen Michael vanish in front of her eyes; and, even as he was trying to say something to lessen her grief, she began to turn. Before she faced him, he knew what she was going to ask him to do, and the fear sprang up in him from where it had been sleeping and capered with savage joy.

She came to him and knelt by him, and she said, "If you moved me. If you dug up my coffin and buried me in Mount Merrill, I could be with Michael. We could be together."

"Laura," he said. "Laura, my dear, you know that if it were at all possible—"

"It is possible." Her voice was trembling as if she were about to laugh with delight. "You can do it at night, so that no one will see you. And if you leave my headstone the way it is, nobody will know I'm not buried there. You can do it. I know you can."

He ran his suddenly wet hand along his jaw, thinking absurdly, I must shave, I took terrible with a stubble. Like a tramp.

"I'm not strong enough. I haven't even got a shovel. And if I had, I wouldn't be strong enough to lift the coffin. You saw how they did it. It takes four men. And you have to have a truck. What would I do for a truck?"

"Get Campos," Laura said eagerly. "Campos is as good as four men, and he's got a truck. He'll help you. Please. I know you can do it. Help me now."

Under his hand the raven cackled in soft amusement and muttered, "Ho-*ho*. Screwed like a light bulb. So long, friend."

"No," he said. How hot it was. "Don't ask me, Laura. I'd have to leave the cemetery."

Laura misunderstood at first. She blurted, "You'll be with Campos. He can drive you out and back, and no one will know."

"It isn't that," he said, and then Laura did understand.

"I've never left the cemetery. Never in nineteen years. I just never have."

"It would only be this once," Laura said, but the hope was gone from her voice. "You could come right back."

"I can't," Mr. Rebeck answered. He thought, It has happened, it has happened as I knew it would, and I am no more able to cope with it than I was that long time ago, when I was so anxious to be kind.

It shocked him to see Laura on her knees to him. His head jerked back and forth, as if he were being slapped. He extended a hand to her, knowing that it was a wasted gesture, but wanting her to get up. He could not bear to see her kneel.

"Laura," he said, having always loved her name. "Please get up, Laura. I'd help you if I could, if I possibly could. But I can't pass the gate. I've tried. Laura, listen to me"—for her dark head was still bowed. "I have tried. I cannot pass the gate. No more than you can. I'm as helpless as you are. There is nothing I can do."

She said not a word, and he thought he might die right there, with her kneeling before him. He thought it would be a very good time for it.

"I can't help you," he said. "A man could help. But I'm like Michael, and like you. Nothing that hurts a man can hurt me, but there is nothing a man does that I can do. I can't walk through the gate and take you to Michael, Laura. It's like walking into the wind. You take the same step again and again, and little by little the wind blows you away from the place you wanted to go. Don't ask me any more, Laura."

He did not see her rise from her knees, because his face was in his hands. His fingers gripped and rubbed at his skin as though he were trying to find out whose face he had put on by mistake. The raven scratched for insects.

"It isn't working," Laura said very softly. "The animals outside are rapidly becoming the animals inside. I'm sorry, Jonathan."

There was no hatred in her eyes when he looked at her. He would have welcomed hatred. There was nothing in her eyes, really, except himself and, perhaps, a little pity.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and then she turned from him and ran down the hillside, past the hollow of the empty grave, and out onto the pebbled road. She moved like a ribbon, like a veil, like a feather, like a kite, like whatever gets caught by the wind and blown far away from the place where it belongs, and is lost, and then in time whistled back to its rightful place again.

The sun was so bright that Mr. Rebeck could barely see her. Now he saw blackness between the trees and knew it for her hair, now a moment of gray that was her dress. Most of the time he could not see her at all, but he heard her voice calling, "Michael! Michael, wait for me! Michael! Oh, Michael, wait!"

And just before she reached the bend in the road and he lost sight of her altogether, he heard her say, "Michael," again, and he knew somehow that Michael had waited.

He felt a little better, and much sadder.

"He wanted to turn back," he explained to the raven, "but he was afraid to, so he walked slowly and hoped that she would follow him. Now they will walk to the gate together, or at least as far as they can. I think that's better than his going alone."

"Ducky," said the raven. "Jesus, I don't like the taste of crickets. I don't know why I eat them. They're supposed to be good for you."

Mr. Rebeck tried to stroke the bird again, but the raven sidled away from him.

"I was right," he said. "Wasn't I? I couldn't possibly have helped her. You know I couldn't."

"I know nothing," the raven said. "Don't come sniffing around me, friend. I don't make decisions. I'm a bird."

"That's right," Mr. Rebeck said. He got slowly to his feet and stretched a little, because he was cramped from sitting in one place so long.

XIII

"What shall I do?" he asked, still hoping that the raven would answer him. "What shall I do? What shall I do?" He stood in the grass with his hands in his pockets and his legs close together, as if it were windy, and he said, "What shall I do?" without remembering that Laura had said it. His legs ached, and his back felt stiff when he moved.

He ought to walk down to the gate, he knew, if he were ever to believe again in his fiction of being useful to the dead. Laura would be there, and in need of someone. It was clearly his place to go to her and be consoling, affectionate, and gently wise. He had seen more of life than she, and known more of death; so, naturally, the word that would make her wise too must come from him. It was fitting. Anyway, there was no one else now.

But he did not want to go alone. He asked the raven to come with him, even part of the way, but the bird said no, and flew away. Mr. Rebeck watched him as long as he could, because he thought the raven flew beautifully. He felt listless and lonely when the raven was gone. A little while ago he had been sitting with three friends; now there was only himself on the hillside, and the transition was too sudden for him. He wondered if very old men felt that way. Perhaps children did, children who had fallen asleep in a room full of light, and pleasant smells, and the sounds of silver and glass, and wakened much later, alone in a strange bed in the middle of the night, in a room that might have been friendly and familiar once, but was no more.

Even without the raven along for company, he would go and find Laura. Someone should be with her now. He took a few slow steps down the hill and then stopped, bracing his legs against the slope. Below him, the grave was a brown bald spot on the earth. He wondered how long it would be before the grass covered it again.

"She will be by the gate," he said, "and there will be a few marks on the ground where the truck has passed." It was easy enough to imagine her, a frantic whisper in front of the mockingly open gate, crying out to the black iron to let her through. He did not like to think about it. It made him feel as if he had no legs.

"I cannot help her." He said it very loudly, looking around him. As far as he could see, there was no one. He waited for a moment, as if he were hoping that someone would challenge him; then he turned and walked back up the small hill to the scrawny dirt road that ran from it. Once he looked back and saw the deep scars in the earth that the heavy truck had made. They would fill with water when it rained again, and in time, weeds would grow out of them.

But he could not slam his mind against Laura. The moment he relaxed, the moment he ran out of things to think about the goodness of the day, she returned and stood like a torch in the middle of his mind. He drove her away by admiring the beauty of some flowers, but she returned again, more beautiful, with her black hair and gray dress and dead-of-winter eyes, saying, "It's not working. I'm sorry Jonathan."

"There was nothing I could do," he said to her. "I was the wrong man to ask for help. Would you rather I had promised to help you, and then disappointed you? At least I was man enough to face my own weakness. It is not everyone who is honest enough to do that."

Laura said nothing. Instead she retreated quietly to the back of his mind, where she remained, glimmering in shadow. He told her again, that she was wasting her time, and hurting him into the bargain, but she did not answer.

Even the trains were silent. There was an elevated train running past one side of the cemetery, and a subway on the other side, so that he thought of the trains as his fences against the city. He liked the noises they made. At night, in the slippery moments before he fell asleep, their deep clattering and cat-shrieks made him feel less alone. He knew their schedules by heart, and he knew that it had been too long a time since he had heard a train go by.

Laura has stopped the trains, he thought, or at least she had made them run without noise, so that I might be free to concentrate on feeling guilty. He knew, of course, that this was not true. Undoubtedly the trains were running as they always had. He was simply not hearing them.

The road widened and became pavement, and he walked on, saying to himself, I can understand her point of view very easily. She cannot imagine a living man not being able to walk in and out of the cemetery as he chooses. She has seen men do it every day. They are undoubtedly doing it now, as she kneels by the gate. In and out they walk, so confident of themselves that they do not break their strides in the least as they pass through the gate. Even Campos—and Campos is very much like me. She does not see why it should be such a hard thing for me to do. Well, neither do I, really, except that this place is not merely the place where I live, the place where I sleep. It is my skin, and a man only walks out of the skin of his body with a great deal of difficulty, and much pain afterward. I am afraid of pain, and pain is cold and aging and being useless. I should have made Laura understand that.

He was coming to a more well-to-do section of the cemetery. Then, farther on, the mausoleums began to thin out. The last one was an old favorite, a large cylindrical building, based on three concentric marble circles which formed steps leading up to a small glass door with a cross on top. The whole thing reminded Mr. Rebeck of the head and shoulders of a knight. The cupola would be the helmet, he thought, the door the mouth-opening, and the three steps the whatever-it-was that protected the throat. A bas-relief band ran all around the mausoleum, exactly where the knight's forehead would be. It was carved deeply with a pattern of crossed swords tangled in vine leaves. That might be the knight's lucky piece, if they had such things, or a favor from a rich lady. Perhaps the knight had merely stood still for a moment, or fallen asleep, and the world had risen around him, like a pile of dead leaves. It could have happened. It was one of the things about the world that frightened him. You closed your eyes for a little while, and when you opened them again you were up to your shoulders in earth and dead leaves. You had to be awake all the time, and moving.

"The animals outside are rapidly becoming the animals inside," Laura said in his mind.

"No, they aren't," he answered irritably. "Fear has stopped at the gate of this place. If I left, it would be on me again, but it cannot follow me here. I am safe here, and nothing can harm me."

"If there is nothing you fear," Laura said from a great distance, "then you are not a man."

"Did I ever claim to be?" he demanded, feeling that he had scored an important point against her. "Manhood is not something you put on and take off and put on again. It is not a reward for courage. There is no prize of manhood waiting for me if I am brave enough to leave the cemetery. I am neither man nor ghost. For your sake I wish I were the one, for my sake I wish I were the other. As it is, I can help neither of us. Try not to blame me. It is not altogether my fault."

A patrol car honked behind him, and he stepped quickly aside to let it pass. They still made him nervous, and he still tried to turn his face away from the driver, but he no longer thought to run and hide when he saw one of the black cars with the oak-leaf insignia on the sides. He walked along the road, occasionally reaching out a hand to stroke the green, sharp fur of the small pine trees that grew in this area. Only a few of them had been there when he had first come to live in the cemetery.

"Anyway," he said, although the Laura in his mind had said nothing, "it isn't only the idea of leaving the cemetery. Suppose I were not able to come back? Suppose I could never live here again?"

Wanting to be fair, he added, "Of course, I don't see why I couldn't. If I were strong enough to pass the gate once, I ought to be able to do it a second time. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that I could never return. What would I do then? How could I live?"

He found himself pleading with the quiet woman whom he could not see. "I couldn't live out there, Laura. It's been too long a time, too long a time of sleeping on marble and playing chess with ghosts. How can I talk to people, I who have told jokes to the dead, and sung songs with them? How can I ever get used to eating in restaurants, having been fed by a raven? What will I do with myself? How will I earn money? Where will I live? I have no place to go if I cannot come back here. Who will teach me to sleep in a bed again, and to cross streets? In God's name, Laura, how can I live in the world without dying?"

Laura did not answer. He passed the roofless ring of pillars that Michael had seen when he first walked through the cemetery looking for someone to talk to. A revolving sprinkler in the center darkened the bases of the white columns as it watered the grass they surrounded. He stood between the pillars for a few minutes, letting the bright water splash against his hands and wrists.

"I am too old," he tried to explain to her. "I am older than I thought. Not my body. My body doesn't care what I do. But my mind is old and does not accept change easily, and challenge sends it scurrying for cover. You and Michael are very dear to me. You know that." He said that part quite loudly. "But you must believe me when I tell you that there is no way I can help you without certainly hurting myself. And I am very much afraid of hurting myself. At least I am being honest with you."

When Laura still did not answer, but only shone dimly in the arched corridors of his mind, like a dagger at the bottom of a well, he became angry, feeling that his honesty had been rejected. Then he thought of Michael's suicide and Laura's unsureness of the reasons for her own death, and, because he thought he was put-upon and knew he was suffering, he said a cruel thing.

"It isn't as if I were the only one who did not fit into the world. Think of yourselves before you send me on my errand of mercy. Of the three of us, who hid in the earth like frightened foxes, and who lived? You may have looked more at ease in the world than I, and been more able to keep up the pretense of living with your neighbors, but who lived, who lived?"

Even as he was saying the words he hated and disowned them, but he said it all, straight through until he was sure he was finished, and then he shivered and felt wretched. There was a thin, liquid bitterness in the back of his throat.

"All right, I'm sorry," he said to Laura. She stood so quietly in his mind. "You know I'm sorry. Either forgive me and be at least a little tolerant, or else hate me and leave me alone. Right now, I don't much care which."

For a while he thought that Laura had left him, for he could find no trace of her inside his head. He sighed, telling himself that the inevitable is a great blessing to a man weary of making choices. In time he would undoubtedly forgive himself, absorbing his loss the way a fish's wounded mouth gradually absorbs a broken fishhook. Given a little time, he would not only forget Laura, he would come to believe that she had never been real, that he himself had made her up out of a head full of unicorns and sad virgins. And perhaps he had.

It might be, he thought, that Michael and Laura and every other ghost with whom he had talked and passed time had never existed except as he was lonesome and wanted company. Perhaps the dead were dead and there were no ghosts except his own memories of lost chances, friends never spoken to, letters never written, never answered, women never accosted on the street or smiled at in subways. Or perhaps, to be blunt about it, he might well be a good deal madder than he thought. He had always considered himself a little mad.

But they had needed him a little, he thought, and perhaps that meant that they were real. Dreams never needed you to remind them that they existed—it was always the other way around. Perhaps they were real after all, Michael and Laura and all the others; for they had come to him, calling him by his name, asking him for the small kindnesses he had never been able to give away before. And he had given them all away, eagerly, almost frantically, and now there were none left. He could feel the difference in himself, as though he were beginning to cave in. There had never been very much to give, really, and now there was nothing, nothing except the little that he had always planned to save for himself so that he might be warm when he was old.

"I will not do it," he said, knowing that Laura was listening, even though he could not see her. "Not even for you. I will not help you because it is too much effort for too little return. I do not love you"—this to Michael as well, and whoever else might be listening to him—"and I am sorry if I led you to believe that I loved you. The fault was mine. I only love myself, and that affair is dying of time and knowledge, as all love dies. Soon it will be over, and I shall have some sort of peace, with nobody asking me to do things for them."

He thought of Mrs. Klapper and wondered if she would come today. If she did, he would tell her the same thing and get it over with. He should never have accepted anything from her—concern, companionship, or the story about Linda. If she came, he would give her back the raincoat and tell her to stop bothering him. He hoped she would listen.

Stopping to get his bearings, he discovered that he was approaching the Wilder mausoleum, but from a different direction from his usual one. The road was beginning to rise before it sloped down into the shallow valley in which his mausoleum was located. At the top of the hill, scrolled and white, white as soap, there stood up the castle whose foundation was the chest and belly of Morris Klapper. The building seemed bigger every time Mr. Rebeck saw it. It was the only thing he had ever seen that did.

I will sit on the steps for a while, he decided, because I am tired. I will open my shirt and roll up my sleeves and get some sun. When the sun goes down I will go down the hill to my own place and wait until the raven comes to find me.

When he reached the steps of the Klapper mausoleum he stood still, looking up at the white roof. He had read or heard somewhere that the earliest gravestones were just that—stones piled thickly on top of a hasty grave to keep the wolves from digging up the body. If that were the case, he thought, then Morris Klapper was quite safe. The animals inside—whatever Laura meant by that—could not touch him. God himself would break a few fingernails getting at Morris Klapper.

He sat down on the steps, which were not nearly so comfortable as the ones he was used to, and raised his face to the sun. With his eyes closed, he felt the warmth soaking into his skin. He liked sitting in the sun. It made him feel like a father, lying on a park bench with a newspaper over his belly, almost asleep, watching his son play in the dirt. But the daydream seemed a little ragged around the edges today. He could not feel at ease on the wooden bench, no matter how often he shifted his position, and the boy vanished whenever he took his eyes off him.

"Very well," he said aloud. "I have a bit of a guilty conscience. This is perfectly natural, and nothing to be ashamed of. It will pass. This too shall pass away and become a nought."

Behind him a voice said, "I wish I'd said that."

Mr. Rebeck turned quickly and saw nothing. There was nothing at all between him and the door of the mausoleum.

"Hello," he said nervously. "Is somebody there?"

"What?" said the voice.

"Is anyone there?" Mr. Rebeck asked again, feeling a little silly about it now.

"Oh," said the voice. "I'm here. For quite a while."

The voice was faint, but clear and very dry. It made Mr. Rebeck think of thin shoes walking in sand.

"Are you Morris Klapper?" he asked.

"I don't know," the voice answered slowly. "I hadn't thought—" Then, with sureness, "Yes. Yes, I must be. I am Morris Klapper."

"My name is Jonathan Rebeck." He wished that he could see Morris Klapper, to find out if he really did look like him.

"What are you doing here? I don't know you, do I?"

"No," Mr. Rebeck said. "I live here."

"Here? In the cemetery?"

Mr. Rebeck nodded. The voice said nothing, but he was sure that he sensed disapproval.

"You have a beautiful house," he said, unconsciously adopting Mrs. Klapper's term. "I was just admiring it."

"What, this place?" He thought he heard a dusty sigh. "You don't know. All I wanted was a nice small stone, with my name on it and perhaps a few words of recommendation. Look what I got. A synagogue. A courthouse."

"Well, your wife wanted you to have an expensive tomb," Mr. Rebeck said.

"Oh yes," Morris Klapper said. "The place has 'Gertrude Klapper' scrawled all over it. It's a monument to her, not me."

"She didn't mean it that way," Mr. Rebeck said angrily. "You're a fool if you think that. She loves you."

"Love is not an excuse for bad taste."

Mr. Rebeck felt that he was being peered at closely, and it made him tense. He had never felt ill at ease with the dead until now, when he spoke with Morris Klapper and could not see him.

"Why are you so interested?" the voice asked. "You don't know my wife."

"I met her when she came to see you. She comes here a lot."

"Ah," Morris Klapper said. "Yes, of course. You did say you lived here. I forgot."

"I've lived here for a long time. Almost twenty years."

"How interesting," Morris Klapper said without interest. "May I ask why?"

"Because I didn't fit into the world, and because everyone else did." He was tired of talking about it. Talk rusted everything in time.

"I see," Morris Klapper said. "So, not belonging in one world, you had no choice but to adopt the other. By default, you might say."

The impersonal scholar-voice was beginning to irritate Mr. Rebeck. "No," he said sharply. "Maybe it was that way at first, but then I found out that this was my place, and that there was room for me here among my own people. I like this world. I feel right here. Even if I could go back to the country I came from, knowing that there would be a place for me, I would not go."

"Bravo," Morris Klapper said. "A speech to move the short-circuited hearts of the dead. Wrong, but even more beautiful because it is wrong. I am glad that I am not too long dead to appreciate a little misdirected beauty. This is not a world. There is only one world, and this is its junkyard. The dead did not make this junkyard, nor have they any interest in turning it into a world. There is nothing here with which to make a world."

"There is love," Mr. Rebeck objected. "I have seen it myself. There is humor, and contention, and friendship. All these I have seen."

"They are here only because you brought them with you. Do you think you have left the world, do you think one escapes that easily? You carry the world with you, wherever you go, like a turtle. You yourself are soft, naked, shapeless tissue, but you carry the hard shell of the world to protect your back and belly. All men carry the world on their backs, wherever they go."

"I don't want the world on my back," Mr. Rebeck said. "I never asked for it. Can I run out from under it? Is there a way out?"

"Death. Not the appearance of death, nor sleeping in the same bed with death. Nothing but the genuine article."

Mr. Rebeck sat on the steps and stared at the barred iron door. There was an inscription above the door, but he could not read it from that distance. My sight is not so good any more, he thought, and then, God, what a great hollow tooth this building is.

Laying his words down carefully, he said, "Sometimes I have thought that I might be a ghost myself. Could that be? Could I have lived here and died and not known it? I think about it a lot."

Again he felt Morris Klapper's dead eyes on him, but the ghost did not speak. Mr. Rebeck bit at a ragged fingernail. It gritted against his teeth and tasted bitter. Far away a car horn yapped. He hoped it would not come this way.

"We are all ghosts," Morris Klapper said at last. "We are conceived in a moment of death and born out of ghost wombs, and we play in the streets with other little ghosts, chanting ghost-rhymes and scratching to become real. We are told that life is full of goals and that, although it is sadly necessary to fight, you can at least choose your war. But we learn that for ghosts there can only be one battle: to become real. A few of us make it, thus encouraging other ghosts to believe that it can be done."

"What is it like?" Mr. Rebeck asked. "To be real, I mean."

Morris Klapper's laugh was like the faint sound of an hourglass being turned over. "Good God, I don't know. I never made it."

"Oh," Mr. Rebeck said. Then he said, "Your wife loved you. Isn't that one way of becoming real?"

"Will you get love off your mind?" Morris Klapper demanded. "Love guarantees nothing. Anyway, Gertrude never loved me. She loved the man she wanted me to be. It was like having a stranger in the house. We were quite happy together, all three of us, but it was not the sort of love that makes a ghost real. I think the only way to become real is to be real to yourself and to someone else. Love has nothing to do with it."

For no particular reason, Mr. Rebeck thought of Mrs. Klapper's crescent hat roosting, thin and foolish, in her hair.

"I have two friends," he said. "They want me to leave the cemetery. Not for my own sake, but because they want me to do them a favor. It isn't a fair thing to ask."

"Nothing is free," Morris Klapper answered. "If you have friends, you have to pay for them sooner or later, like anything else. Nor will the cemetery protect you from this kind of debt. One friend, and the iron around this junkyard is a ring of butter; one debt between friends, and the things you love and fear walk in through the gate, whistling. It is a great mistake to have friends if you like living in cemeteries. You should never have done it, Mr.—what did you say your name was? I am old."

"Rebeck," Mr. Rebeck said. "Do you think I ought to go back, then? Do you think I ought to leave the cemetery?"

"I don't care. It doesn't matter a damn to me. I'm dead, and what you do or do not do does not interest me. You could catch fire as we talk here, and burn to the ground like a hayrick, and I wouldn't care. Except that I haven't seen fire in a very long while, and I don't remember what it looks like."

He was silent. Mr. Rebeck looked at the iron door, but he felt that the ghost was very close to him. When Morris Klapper spoke again, however, his voice was fainter, and Mr. Rebeck had to strain to hear him.

"But I tell you that you are a living man and that you have deceived yourself. For a man there is no choice between worlds. There never was."

Then Mr. Rebeck rose to his feet and cried out, "I am afraid! It is not starving I fear, or talking to people, or even being alone. But I cannot bear to be useless and ineffectual. There must be some meaning to me, if not to my life; there must surely be some purpose that has my name written on it. If this is not so, if I am deceiving myself about this too, then why should I want to become real? What reason have I to live anywhere?"

"Oh, so now you want reasons," Morris Klapper said. Again Mr. Rebeck heard the distant laugh in the air. "I have no reasons for you. Die, if you choose. Die, and you and I will sit together and talk about friendship."

Mr. Rebeck stood on the steps and thought desperately about Mrs. Klapper's hat. His mind was filled with blue-black feathers held together by hope and a shiny-headed pin. Laura was there too, somewhere, waiting. He felt sudden pain in both his thighs, and looked down to see that his hands were clutching him like frightened children. His thin fingers arched and clung, and the muscles between his thumbs and forefingers tightened into little ridges and hollows. He could not make them let go, for he knew that there would be more pain when they did.

"What is it like to be dead?" he asked. He had never asked that question before.

Morris Klapper's answer followed as closely as blood follows a knife. "Like nothing at all. It is like nothing at all."

For the moment more that he stood on the steps, shaking a bit, hands chewing into his thighs, he thought he saw Morris Klapper. It was only a fragment of an image he saw;

gray, and vague as someone else's remembered sorrow, and he might easily have imagined it. But it seemed to him that he saw Morris Klapper, and it seemed that Morris Klapper did look something like him, as one man looks like another.

Then, behind him, he heard Mrs. Klapper's strident, city-colored yell. "Hey, Rebeck!"

He stood without turning, and she called again, "Rebeck! Hoo, *Rebeck!*" There was anxiety in her voice, and he knew that she thought she might have made a mistake and called a greeting to a man who looked very much like him but was actually somebody quite different. His hands fell away from himself, and he felt the quick pain as the blood rushed back to his thighs.

She called again, and this time Mr. Rebeck turned and walked down the road to meet her. He went partly because her voice was high and clear and made him think at once of the cry of a street peddler, the yelp of an outraged policeman, an auto horn, and the triumphant bugle of the cavalry riding to the rescue. But mostly he went to meet her because she was so glad to see that it was really he she had been calling that her voice skidded off the scale and came out as a kind of joyous squeak.

Much later, a long time later, when he was thinking once again of the afternoon he decided to leave the cemetery, he concluded that it was the squeaky "Hey, Rebeck," that did it.

XIV

OH, THAT WAS A MOMENT, when Campos stood up straight, black over the black grave, with the coffin on his shoulders. It cast a shadow in the truck headlights, and Mr. Rebeck could not see Campos's face at all. But he saw the big hands gripping, the hands whose backs were badlands of tight muscles and thick blue veins, with the knuckles like skulls under the moon; and the naked back, where the muscles bunched like fists; and the ribs, so tight against the skin that they made Campos look tiger-striped; and, most of all, the thick legs, spread wide apart to support the man and his long burden. Campos himself cast no shadow, for the earth was very dark.

In that moment without morning, Mr. Rebeck found himself wondering, Is the world holding up Campos now, giving him a place to stand, or is it really Campos who weighs down the world and keeps it from blowing away?

The coffin was heavy up front, and it teetered forward a little, but Campos bent quickly and shifted his hands, and it was all right. Then Campos began to walk to the truck. He took slow, even steps, carrying the coffin high on his shoulder. His legs and back were straight, but his shoulders were perceptibly bowed, and his neck was twisted so that his mouth was close to the coffin, as if he were speaking love to the woman whose body he carried so tenderly. When he reached the truck, he turned and bent his knees until the coffin rested on the lowered tailgates. Then he fell away from it, touching his hand to the ground for support, and straightened up again.

"Okay," he said to the two people who sat near the truck and watched him. With a casual hand he pushed the coffin farther into the back of the truck and reached for his shirt, which hung on the tailgate where he had left it.

Mr. Rebeck heard Mrs. Klapper sigh with exaggerated relief beside him. Before she could say anything, he said to Campos, "Are we going now?"

Campos nodded. He held his shirt without putting it on. He was breathing deeply, cautiously touching a raw spot on his neck where the coffin had rubbed away the skin.

"Okay," he said again. He walked to the front of the truck and stood by the door. In the dim light there his body gleamed gold with sweat, and brown with sweat, and black. He put on his shirt, leaving it unbuttoned.

"Shouldn't we fill in the grave before we go?" Mr. Rebeck asked.

Campos looked over at the empty grave with the piles of dirt scattered around it and shrugged. "Fill it in when I get back. Come on."

Mr. Rebeck rose from the stone he sat on and offered a hand to Mrs. Klapper. Grasping it, she pulled herself to her feet, brushing her dress with her free hand. She was not wearing the crescent hat, after all.

"Well," she said. "So now everything's all right? Nobody's left anything behind?"

"Everything's fine," Mr. Rebeck said. They started walking to the truck. Campos had started the engine.

"Now what?" Mrs. Klapper asked.

"Now we have to take the coffin to Mount Merrill," Mr. Rebeck said. "It's not far."

Mrs. Klapper blinked at him. "And you bury it all over again? *Vey*, what people. Like a dog with a bone."

"It's a favor for a friend. I told you about it."

"I know you told me. It's a favor for a friend. All right, who can refuse a friend? So fine, we sit here all night and watch your friend dig up a grave, and now we got to go with him so we can watch him bury it again. Rebeck, you got some friends I wouldn't even want for enemies."

"I couldn't refuse him," Mr. Rebeck said lamely. "He's a very good friend."

"All right, to you he's a very good friend. Me, I don't like him. He scares me."

The last few words were whispered because they had reached the cab of the truck. Mr. Rebeck pulled the door open and stepped back to let Mrs. Klapper get in first. She gave him a sour look, wagging her head slightly, and he realized that she was a little afraid of sitting next to Campos. However, there was nothing for it; Campos was looking at them, waiting impatiently for them to get in, and they would have enough trouble fitting three people into the cab without worrying about the order. So Mrs. Klapper got in and gingerly seated herself next to Campos. Mr. Rebeck climbed in after her. There was barely room enough for him, even when Mrs. Klapper moved closer against Campos's hard, sweating body. But he sat down next to her and closed the door carefully.

The engine hiccuped fiercely, and the truck jolted off. Mr. Rebeck leaned his elbow on the window and felt the door handle pressing against his leg. It was three in the morning by Mrs. Klapper's tiny wristwatch, and very dark. Mr. Rebeck found it hard to breathe, and even the beating of his heart was painful. He turned his head away from Mrs. Klapper, not wanting her to see how frightened he was.

When he had told Mrs. Klapper that he had decided to leave the cemetery, she had literally whooped with delight. After that, she sat down on a rock and began to cry. She stopped abruptly when he told her that he would have to wait until night to leave. And when he told her about Campos and the coffin she got to her feet, holding her purse in both hands, and said that he was a crazy grave robber, and that it would undoubtedly be better if he stayed in the cemetery where the psychiatrists couldn't get at him. He had gone mad from being alone, just as she had warned him.

But she stayed, snapping her fingers for an explanation she could accept with dignity, whether she believed it or not. The one he finally chose, about doing a last favor for Campos, was not as solid as she would have preferred, but it would do. She accepted it, saying that friendship was a fine thing, and adding that she would wait with him, because he would certainly get lost if he went into the city alone at night.

There was still Campos to be approached, but he would not come on duty until midnight. So they strayed around the cemetery, trying hard to look like an average middle-aged couple, and secretly believing that anyone could look at them and tell that they were very unusual people who were about to do a very unusual thing. From five o'clock on they stayed out of Walters' way as he drove around the cemetery looking for stragglers. Mr. Rebeck was afraid that Mrs. Klapper would become bored very quickly, but he realized after a while that she was having a wonderful time playing cops-and-robbers because she knew that it was the last time they would ever do anything like this. It was then that his heartbeats began to hurt, even though the time of leaving was hours away.

Together they sat on the mausoleum steps as the sun went down and ate the little food that he had left over from the previous day. They were oddly shy with each other because they had never eaten together before, but they smiled at each other often and sometimes talked with their mouths full. When the meal was over he brought her a glass of water from the faucet behind the building.

Then he excused himself for a moment and went into the mausoleum, closing the door behind him. The room was dark and stuffy with the sun down, but he had long since ceased to need his eyes here. He knew where everything was: his clothes more or less in one corner; his few books in another, covered with paper bags and waxed paper; his blankets and cushions and raincoat in a third. The raincoat was folded carefully; it was too new to lie crumpled. A tennis ball lay on top of the blankets. The raven had found it in the cemetery, years ago, and had brought it to him. He never used it for anything, but he always kept it where he could see it, even though it had turned greenish-black with age.

It was a very narrow room, he realized, although it had always seemed wide enough for his needs. His mind must look like that to an outsider: many old things cluttered in a narrow space; neat, but without any real order. But, like the room, his mind had always suited him, and he knew that both would continue to do so if he stayed, because there was nothing to compare them with except the barer minds and narrower houses of the dead.

"I must take some things with me," he said aloud. "How can I go to the city again with nothing of my own?" He stooped and picked up an armful of clothes, thinking vaguely that he might sort them out and take the best ones with him. But he had picked up much too many to sort properly, and he held them too close to his chest.

"I must certainly have something of my own," he said hoarsely, and then the door creaked hesitantly and the room brightened a little. Mrs. Klapper stood in the doorway.

"I heard you talking," she said. She saw him standing with his arms full of clothes, and came farther into the room. "Rebeck, what is this? You expecting a moving van?"

"I'm just taking some of my things with me," he said, knowing how ridiculous he must look to her. "I didn't want to leave the place all littered up."

"What's the matter, you can't leave your stuff here one more day? Who's going to steal it? Look, don't load yourself down now, you won't be able to help your friend. We'll come back first thing tomorrow with a couple of big shopping bags and get everything in."

"No," he said quickly. "No. I have to take it now. I won't be coming back."

"All right, so I'll come by myself and get it. Rebeck, don't worry about it, it'll be fine." Gently she took the bundle of clothes from his unresisting arms and held them herself. She smiled at him, and he managed to smile back.

"Rebeck," she said, "you know, if you changed your mind all of a sudden, if you don't want to go, it's all right. You can tell me. It doesn't matter."

With those words she had locked him outside the gate. Until then, he might have stayed.

"Leave them, then," he said, and walked out of the door of the mausoleum for the last time. She followed him a moment later. They held hands as they walked and did not say anything.

Midnight and Campos came together. It was as if he had ridden the midnight to work the way other people took buses, and tied it outside the black gate to wait for him until he was ready to go home. Mrs. Klapper almost ran the first time she saw the big man, and Campos seemed equally wary of her. She stayed outside the office while he and Mr. Rebeck talked together. The radio was playing all the time.

And inside, shouting sometimes to be heard over the radio, Mr. Rebeck pleaded for Laura and Michael and, because of them, for himself. He never remembered anything he had said to Campos that midnight, as a man has no memory of the words he speaks in his sleep and thinks them the words of a mad stranger when they are repeated to him.

Asking a favor of Campos, Mr. Rebeck thought, was like praying to a jade god with blind onyx eyes. Campos sprawled in his chair with his eyes almost closed and his dark face without expression. Mr. Rebeck left long pauses in his proposition, like blanks in a questionnaire, but Campos never said anything, and he had to go on. He must have talked for fifteen or twenty minutes, with the radio going and Campos hulking in his chair like a blind god.

When he finished speaking, Campos did not move. He stared at Mr. Rebeck with his eyes closing and closing until the last flicker of black had disappeared. Quite still, quite still, Campos; as calm as a window face to face with tragedy.

Then, still blind, he reached out a big hand and turned the radio off.

In the silence Mr. Rebeck heard the breaths of two men, himself and Campos.

Campos opened his eyes and got up. He walked out of the office, leaving the light on. Mr. Rebeck followed him. Mrs. Klapper went with Mr. Rebeck. They had to hurry to keep up with Campos.

Now, squeezed between Mrs. Klapper and the door, with the window open and the hot wind of their passage blowing on his face, Mr. Rebeck looked at his hands. There were new scabs of dried blood on his knuckles, and a scrape on the back of his right hand still bled sluggishly. He had tried to help Campos dig at first, until he scraped his hand and the big man turned on him and told him to go somewhere and sit down. He was rather proud of his bleeding hand as he looked at it. He hoped that Laura could see it.

Mrs. Klapper craned her neck to see what he was looking at. "You put some Mercurochrome on that, first thing," she said. She touched his hand lightly and leaned back.

This thing we have done is illegal, he thought. I ought to tell Campos. Maybe he doesn't know. It is only fair to tell Campos. We will be at the gate very soon.

"Campos," he said. "If the police find out what we have done, they may arrest us."

"Rebeck, don't talk like that," Mrs. Klapper said worriedly. "The devil can hear you."

Campos did not even turn his head. "They won't find out."

"If they do," Mr. Rebeck pressed, "it will certainly cost you your job. I just wanted to tell you."

"Work somewhere else. Street's full of jobs."

"Rebeck, *sha!*" Mrs. Klapper said. "What kind of talk is this, policemen and losing jobs? Don't worry so much."

"I just wanted to tell Campos," he said to her. He leaned on the window and watched the tombstones go by like sailing ships.

The truck swung wide around a curve, jouncing as one back wheel slipped into a water-filled rut and out again. Mr. Rebeck knew the road well. There were long ridges of earth and dry grass on each side, and few graves. There would be one more curve before the gate.

If he turned around, he knew, he would be able to see Laura. He was sure of it. She would be sitting on her own coffin, looking forward as he was looking back to find her, and she would not be gray in that moment, but the color of morning. Her dress would be the color of morning, too, and of Queen Anne's lace. Her eyes would be as bright as the eyes of a living woman, and her black hair would fall down to her shoulders. It would be nice to turn and see her, to raise his hand to such beauty.

But if he turned she would speak to him, wanting to thank him for what he was doing for her, and he did not think he ought to be thanked.

In his mind, he said to her, "I am taking you to Michael, as you asked, Laura. But it is not life I am taking you to, and you must understand that. I am taking you to the few minutes or hours of happiness that you earned simply by never having them. Though you close your hands on them, they will pass from you like wild birds, and you will not even remember having had them. It might have been a better thing to leave you where you were. The one delusion you never had in your life was the one about the permanence of happiness. This is what I am giving you. Not life. Not even love. Only this. I am sorry that I cannot give you more. In time I may be sorry that I gave you anything at all. Do not thank me for it. Be happy, if you can, but do not thank me."

He looked past Mrs. Klapper to where Campos sat at the wheel, humming very softly to himself. The big man drove well, without seeming to pay much attention either to the road or to the truck itself. But there was a strange expression on his heavy face as he gripped the wheel and hummed his tune. Mr. Rebeck would not have called it love. The truck might have.

On a sudden impulse Mr. Rebeck leaned forward and said "Campos, Laura sang well, didn't she?"

Campos turned slightly to regard him out of dark, calm eyes. He drove with one hand, buttoning his shirt with the other, taking the road without looking at it.

"Pretty good," he said, and turned his head away.

"Thank you, Campos," said Mr. Rebeck.

Mrs. Klapper sighed and wriggled a little, trying to make herself more comfortable between the two men. "Rebeck, who is this Laura? Don't tell me if I shouldn't know."

Is she jealous? he wondered in halting delight. When was a woman ever jealous over me? How late I shall have to begin so many things.

"A woman I knew once," he said. "I'd almost forgotten her."

Then round the last curve, and the hill sloping away before them, and at the bottom of the hill the black gate.

It was wide open. Campos had left it so. To the left, the one light of the caretaker's office still shone; beyond was a deeper, gray-patched darkness that Mr. Rebeck knew must be the street. The gate moved a little in the night air. He could hear it squeak softly, like a bat.

The iron squeaks and murmurs in the ground and the iron snakes slide through the green leaves. The world is crouched to drop on me out of the first green tree. Why am I doing this, what was it I said I would do? Help me now, Laura. Michael, stay with me a little. Somebody stay with me. A man should not go into the world alone.

Halfway down the hill, the light from the caretaker's office blinked blue and went out. The gate disappeared. Mr. Rebeck was not surprised; the bulb had burned all through that night. The only light now came from the truck's headlights, and from the moon, which was pretty but not really useful.

Campos said, "*Mierda*," as if he were trying to spit out his tongue. He tapped the brake lightly with his foot as a grudging concession to the darkness. The truck slowed a bit, but not much.

"Rebeck," Mrs. Klapper said softly, "you sure?"

He looked at her as she sat next to him, glad she had asked but wanting to tell her that with every escape she offered him she forced him deeper into the world. Did she know that? Probably, he thought. It made no difference.

"No," he said. "I'm not at all sure."

Mrs. Klapper gripped his hand tightly. Her own hand was small and soft, but surprisingly strong. Campos sat behind the wheel and hummed to himself, now and then singing a line or a few words of a song. Mr. Rebeck had never heard it before.

Because the truck's headlights did not reach very far, they did not see the gate again until it was almost upon them. Mr. Rebeck actually rose to his feet, and only knew it when his head bumped on the roof of the cab. Mrs. Klapper held his hand but did not pull at him. Campos did not even bother to look. He hurled the little truck at the gate as if it were a rock to be thrown at a dark window.

It might have been easier if the gate had been the way Mr. Rebeck had dreamed it by night and imagined it by day: the spikes atop it tipped with drying blood, and the iron snakes hissing a silent warning of silent death, poised to strike at the head and heels of any man who came too close. These could be faced, for he had two friends with him, and a man can draw strength from his friends when the iron snakes are all around him.

But the gate was only a gate, after all, and the spikes were very rusty. The truck brushed against it as it passed through, because Campos took his hand off the wheel for a moment to wipe his nose. And then a new road was under their wheels and the gate was behind them, and Mr. Rebeck became slowly aware that he was standing with his head touching the roof of the cab, that Mrs. Klapper was still holding his hand, and that Campos had never stopped his deep, monotonous humming. He sat down, but he did not look back.

"I made it," he said to Mrs. Klapper. "I made it."

"I was holding my breath all the time," Mrs. Klapper said. Her voice sounded very tired.

Mr. Rebeck looked out of the window. He was fascinated by the houses and the cars parked along the curbs.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"This is all Yorkchester," Mrs. Klapper told him. She pointed past him. "Over there my doctor lives. A wonderful man, only with a bad breath on him like his mouth is a thousand years old. You'd think, he's a doctor, a doctor could do something, but no. A fine man. He plays the violin. Rebeck, I was so worried, I thought I'd go crazy."

"It's all right," Mr. Rebeck said. He was leaning back in his seat with his eyes closed.

"I didn't know what to do. I thought, My God, I made him do this, I dragged him all the way down here, look how frightened he is. I thought, If anything happens to him it's your fault, you stupid woman. Rebeck, you're sure you feel okay? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," Mr. Rebeck said. They were driving under the elevated railroad that ran past the cemetery. The truck bounced on the cobblestones, coming so close to the El pillars that he could have touched them. They were a reddish-gray in the headlights, stippled with soft lumps of paint that were crusted on the outside and semi-liquid underneath. It was dark, four-o'clock dark, but some of the stores along the way had left their neon signs on, and their windows seemed very bright in the empty streets.

"You know," he said, "I always thought that there should be a graciousness to life. It was very important to me. Sometimes I would say to myself, 'When the world learns how to be gracious, then I will go back. Not before.' I thought I would know, you see."

An empty taxicab pulled abreast of them as they stopped for a traffic light (Campos was capricious about traffic lights; sometimes he stopped for them), and the driver and Mr. Rebeck stared at each other with real curiosity until the light changed and the cab vanished between the pillars like a deer among trees. Campos turned left and drove up a long paved street choked with two-family houses. There was a light on in one of them, and a middle-aged woman standing at a window. Her eyes were tired but amused as she watched the little truck rattle by.

"And now I've left the cemetery," Mr. Rebeck went on, "with no guarantee that the world has improved at all. In fact, I am sure it hasn't, not in any way that means anything. But it doesn't bother me, for some reason. Not right now, anyway. Maybe tomorrow, or a little later. Right now all that makes me sad is a feeling that I have wasted almost twenty years of my life. It would not be waste if I had learned something, if I were a better man because of those years. But I am as I was, only older, and that makes it waste. And waste to me is a terrible thing, a crime."

He was sure as he spoke that Mrs. Klapper would agree with him, but he was also sure that she would shrug and say, All right, so you wasted. So what? What can you do about it? At least, you didn't get sick and die there, thank God. What else counts? He needed her reassurance.

Instead she said slowly, "Everybody wastes time. A little here, a little there. You wake up in the morning, it's all bright and shiny, you get out of bed and say to yourself, Today is the day! Today I'm going to be a great man. Then you look out the window, you see a pretty girl on the sidewalk—*zoom*, into the pants, into the shirt, downstairs, 'Hello, did you drop this?' And you say to yourself, All right, so tomorrow I'll be a great man. Who ever got anywhere by rushing? Tomorrow positively, Thursday for sure. . . . Tell me, Rebeck, that's not wasting time?"

Mr. Rebeck only looked at her. Her forehead was in shadow, but he could see her eyes.

"So let's say you marry this girl. All right, you can still be a great man. Look at all the great men who had wives. Go ahead, be a great man, don't let me stop you. Only first you should stop by the grocer and pick up something for the dog. Also for the baby, soft, because he's getting his teeth. To do this, you have to have a job five days a week, you can be a great man on weekends."

The streets were very empty. The few cars that passed were all taxicabs. Once a cat galloped across the street in front of them and hid behind the fender of a parked car, watching them until they were safely past.

"Rebeck, this is not a waste? This is the big waste. Five minutes here, an hour there, maybe a week somewhere else. You count it all up, you got your twenty years, and maybe more. At least you got yours over with in one lump. Now you got them out of the way, you can go be a great man."

"Only I'm not a great man, Gertrude," Mr. Rebeck said quietly. "I could never be. It isn't in me."

"So who's breaking your arm, be great? Did I say it like an order? Don't be great, you don't feel like it. Just don't do anything you don't want to, that's all I'm saying. You shouldn't have to do something you don't like."

She looked at him thoughtfully, nibbling at her gloved forefinger as she always did. "Rebeck, what are you going to do, now you're out of the cemetery? You got any idea?"

"I don't know," Mr. Rebeck said. "Pharmacy is the only trade I ever learned. I suppose I could go back to it."

"Pharmacy is good," Mrs. Klapper agreed. "A druggist makes a very nice living. Only it's changed a lot in twenty years; they have a lot of new things now. Miracle drugs."

"I could study. It would be funny, going back to school at my age."

"What's funny? Lots of people do it, people older than you." Mrs. Klapper frowned. "I'm trying to think of all the new drugs they got now you'd have to know about. Penicillin. You know about penicillin?"

"Yes," Mr. Rebeck said. "I read about it in the newspapers."

"Good, so at least you know penicillin. They also got a lot of things that sound alike. I mean, they end the same way. Let me think a minute—"

"The sulfa drugs?" Mr. Rebeck suggested. "The myacins?"

Mrs. Klapper stared at him. "Rebeck, you know all this, what are you bothering me for? What are you *hocking* me you got to go back to school? You're out of the cemetery five minutes, already you're a druggist again."

Mr. Rebeck laughed. "No. I just read about those drugs. I don't know how they work. I'd have to study."

"All right, so study. Sometimes you worry me, Rebeck."

When they stopped for another traffic light, Mr. Rebeck saw a group of boys standing on a streetcorner. They wore sports shirts and heavy cowboy boots. All of them had pale faces, and they leaned against a wall and one another, looking idly at the truck. They looked weakly vicious, and lonely.

"Hoods," Mrs. Klapper said, following Mr. Rebeck's glance. "This I'm sorry you had to see. Bums, all of them. What good could they be doing, up so late? *Nudnicks*."

Mr. Rebeck grinned at her as the truck jerked forward again. "And what are you doing up so late, a respectable Bronx woman like you?"

"My fault? My fault? I said, Hey, let's go over to Mount Merrill and drop off a corpse? This was my idea? I got nothing to do with this, Rebeck. If a cop stops us, you kidnaped me. You and the big one over there."

She yawned and stretched, looking past Mr. Rebeck at the unlighted apartment houses and the moon going down behind them. Her forearm rested gently on Mr. Rebeck's shoulder as she looked out of the window.

There weren't any trolleys any more, he remembered. The raven had told him. The flimsy-looking cars were gone, all of them, and the tracks they had run on were paved over. Now and then, looking carefully, he could catch a wink of silver out of the hidden heart of the street, and then he would know that a trolley track still ran there, wrapped in ragged tar and asphalt.

He looked back once, through the glass slit behind him, because he wanted to see Laura once more. But the back of the truck was empty, except for the smugly stark coffin and the few tools that rattled beside it. There was nothing of Laura herself, neither dark hair nor autumn voice, neither gray eyes nor remembrance of soft laughter. Only a coffin in the back, and a pick, and a shovel, and a crowbar. Of Laura, who had sung to him and loved Michael, nothing.

And yet he knew she was there. As surely as he knew that he would never be able to see ghosts again.

Well, I made the choice myself, he thought. I knew what I was doing. Sooner or later I would have had to choose. No man can speak with both the living and the dead forever.

Then he heard Campos humming in a kind of metallic harmony with the snarling engine, and he thought, Campos can. Campos will always be at ease in both worlds, because he belongs to neither. He loves no one—no, forget that. Morris Klapper was right; love has nothing to do with it. Campos simply does not care about either world, and it is caring about things that grinds down our souls and makes us do stupid things. He will always be able to see ghosts and people, because neither of them can touch him, to please him or to hurt him. I thought I was like that.

For a little time he thought of Laura, and envied Campos the life that he himself had left. Then he forgot envy as he watched the houses pass by in silence. The houses amazed him. There was an unreality about them, a cleanness of glass and new bricks that made it impossible to imagine people living in them, eating and making love and flushing toilets. Yet obviously people did. He saw ashcans in front of most of the buildings, and baby carriages; these are the two sure signs of human occupancy anywhere. He wondered if Mrs. Klapper lived in a place like these.

"Gertrude," he said, nudging her elbow, "is this still Yorkchester we're in?"

Mrs. Klapper blinked and sat up straight. She had been half asleep, he realized.

"No," she said, trying to get her bearings by the street names. "Where we are, I'm not sure, but it's already way out of Yorkchester."

"I hope Mount Merrill isn't far," Mr. Rebeck said. "We haven't got too much time."

"Hey, you," Mrs. Klapper said to Campos, familiarity having whittled away her fear of him. "You. Sitting Bull. How long to Mount Merrill?"

For answer Campos turned the truck so sharply to the left that Mrs. Klapper was thrown against Mr. Rebeck, jarring the breath out of him. The big man drove the truck up a steep, pebbly hill, flanked on both sides by a few small private houses. When the hill leveled off he let the truck coast a little and then brought it to a stop in front of a gold-painted iron gate. There was no watchman behind the gate, and no light in the wooden caretaker's shack.

"This is it?" Mrs. Klapper asked, sounding mildly chagrined. "This little thing is Mount Merrill?"

"Back entrance." Campos grunted. Leaving the motor on, he got out of the cab and walked forward to investigate the lock on the gate.

"Hoo-*hoo*," Mrs. Klapper said. "Back entrance. We come in with the groceries, huh?"

"It's easier this way," Mr. Rebeck explained. "They always have someone on duty at the main entrance, Campos says."

Campos flicked the padlock casually with his forefinger and went around to the back of the truck. He returned a moment later, carrying a crowbar, which he fitted into the hasp of the lock. Without preamble, he placed both hands on the crowbar and pushed down. He actually rose on his toes and threw his whole weight on the bar. The long muscles of his wrists and forearms swelled briefly, and then the lock flew apart with a sound like that of a spoon being dropped into a glass. Campos opened the gate wide and came back toward the truck.

"My God!" Mrs. Klapper said in the whisper she ordinarily reserved for hurricanes and quadruplets. "Rebeck, my

God, didn't he ever go to school? What are we doing here?"

"There was no other way to get in." Mr. Rebeck was a little worried himself. Having broken his own lock, he would have broken a good many more to bring Laura to Michael, but he was beginning to think that it had not been wise to bring Mrs. Klapper. If they were arrested, would she be also? He had never considered that possibility.

Mrs. Klapper was considering it. "For that kind of thing," she muttered as Campos climbed back into the cab, "for that kind of thing they put you in jail and eat the key for breakfast."

"It can't be that bad," Mr. Rebeck said, sure that it was.

"No? Rebeck, I don't think they even let you get mail. They probably read you the newspaper once a month."

And so they drove through the Mount Merrill Cemetery, staring ahead in the cottony dark for a place to bury Laura Durand. In time they found one, a rather arid patch of land with a few small graves around it, and none close by. It would have been good, Mr. Rebeck thought, to bury her close to Michael's grave, but it would have been merely a nice gesture, and the dead do not appreciate the importance of gestures to the living.

Campos marked out the lines of the grave with the edge of his spade and began to dig. Mr. Rebeck and Mrs. Klapper sat in the cab, Mr. Rebeck's offer of help having been silently refused. For a long time neither of them said anything. They watched Campos standing ankle deep, calf deep, knee deep in the earth, hurling the dirt over his shoulder with an odd, blind twist of his body. Dawn was not near yet, but the dark had softened as the stars went out, so that Campos was no longer the black shape that waits where man thinks his destiny should be standing; he was just Campos, no one's friend, digging a grave for Laura for his own reasons, or for no reason at all.

Presently Mrs. Klapper looked at Mr. Rebeck and said thoughtfully, "You know, Rebeck, this whole thing is crazy. Everything. Look, it's after four in the morning, the sun's going to come up soon. Everybody's going to wake up. I'm an old woman, I should be waking up too. So instead I'm sitting in a graveyard in a truck, at four in the morning, watching King Kong tearing up the grass, and waiting for the police to come along. Rebeck, for you maybe this is not crazy, God alone knows. For me, believe me, this is crazy."

"I know," Mr. Rebeck said, wanting to tell her about Laura and Michael, and knowing that it was the one thing he could never tell her. "But it really is a last favor to a friend. Someday I'll tell you about it, if I can."

Mrs. Klapper shrugged. "Tell me, don't tell me. I believe you. It's too late not to believe you. Anyway, Rebeck, when you are my age you find out it doesn't make any difference if you don't believe something somebody said to you. Who cares? It leaves you with nothing. A woman my age has no choice. Believe. Who knows, maybe it'll come out right."

She pushed her thick hair back from her forehead and scavenged frantically in her purse, trying to hold back a sneeze until she found a handkerchief. Watching her at the especially unbecoming moment, Mr. Rebeck felt his heart grow warm for her. Wanting his features to show at least something of this, he contorted them into an awkward smile.

"You're not old," he said quietly.

Mrs. Klapper smiled then, rubbing the back of her neck, her eyes half closed.

"I know it," she said happily. "You think I could say I was if I was?"

Then Campos was finished digging the grave, and the rest was all three of them lowering the coffin into the hole and Mr. Rebeck helping Campos fill the grave with earth and stamp it smooth. Watching them hopping and prancing under the blue dark, big scarecrow, little scarecrow, Mrs. Klapper burst out laughing. "Like the kids in the candy store," she said.

No matter how flat they tried to make it, how flush with the ground, it looked like a grave where no grave should be. They could only hope that no Mount Merrill official would pass that way until the ground had settled. The winter would freeze it and frost the turned-up brown earth to the color of the earth around it, and in spring the ferny wild grass would grow on Laura's grave, hiding it and warming it.

"Anyway, it's got no headstone to give it away," Mr. Rebeck said. He paused and added, "Isn't it strange? Laura will be buried here and no one in the world will know it except us. Everybody will see her headstone in the Yorkchester Cemetery and think she is buried there. And for them it will be just as if she were."

"People don't know," Campos said surprisingly. He leaned on his spade, sweating again, but breathing easily. "The stone's all they want. Put up a stone, tell them their mother's buried under it. That's all they want. They go to the stone and say, Sorry, Ma, I'm a bastard. Makes no difference."

They walked slowly to the truck, but Mr. Rebeck kept turning to look back at the grave. He did not really expect to see Laura spring lightly from the ground, lovely and immortal, and run among the stones until she found the man who loved her, but he would have liked to see them together. There are no happy endings, he knew, because nothing ends; and if there were any being dispensed, a great many worthier people would be in line for them long before Michael and Laura and himself. But the happiness of the unworthy and the happiness of the so-so is as fragile and self-centered and dear as the happiness of the righteous and the worthy; and the happiness of the living is no less short and desperate and forgotten than the joys of the dead.

Campos drove them back to the gate, which he closed carefully and pointlessly behind them, and then drove the truck down the steep hill. A young couple sat on the porch of one of the houses, talking softly, very close to each other, but not touching. They looked up as the truck passed the house, and then looked away.

"That's the best way in the world to catch cold," Mrs. Klapper said. "Dopes." But she was smiling sleepily.

At the bottom of the hill Campos stopped the truck. Mr. Rebeck and he looked at each other.

"Well?" the big man asked. "You coming back?"

Mr. Rebeck sat quite still. Mrs. Klapper drew her hand from his and waited.

Meeting Campos's passionless eyes, he thought, This man is pure, and as beautifully sterile as all cemeteries. I am neither pure nor sterile. I am infected with life and will die of it in time. Sainthood is not for me, nor wisdom, nor purity. Only pharmacy, and such love as I have not buried and lost. This is a very little out of all a man might have, but it is all a man ever gets. I will sell coltsfoot candy, if there is any left in the world.

So he shook his head and said, "No, Campos."

Campos nodded and started the engine again. Mrs. Klapper climbed out of the truck, but Mr. Rebeck remained behind for a moment.

"Good-by," he said. He held out his hand.

Campos looked at the thin, brown hand without much interest. Finally he took it briefly in his own, which was rough-skinned and dry.

"See you," he said, and drove away.

The man and the woman watched the truck with much greater intentness than it deserved until it turned a corner and was gone. Then Mrs. Klapper stretched elaborately, still without looking at Mr. Rebeck, and said, "So?"

"So?" he mimicked her. "So what?"

"So where to now? It's almost dawn, Rebeck. You got a place to go?"

The man looked at the strange houses, and at the street lights, which were going out like stars. He put his arm around the woman's shoulders.

"It's not dawn yet," he said, smiling at her. "This is what they call false dawn."

"All right, dawn, false dawn. I'm not going to fight with you. Come on home with me, have at least a cup of coffee. It'll wake you up."

"I'm up," Mr. Rebeck said. "I've been up all night."

"Rebeck, you're a trial and a trouble to an old woman. So you're coming or not?"

"I'm coming, Gertrude."

They walked along the street together, slowly, because they were both very tired. Mrs. Klapper's heels clicked on the sidewalk. They were the only people on the street, as far as they could see.

"There's a subway around here," Mrs. Klapper said. "Gets you right home." She looked up at him—a pleasurable feeling, he thought. "Rebeck, you like sour cream with cottage cheese?"

"I don't remember," he said. "I haven't had any in a long time."

"Wonderful in hot weather. With blueberries, if I still have some. I probably ate them all up. Walk slower, Rebeck, where are you rushing to? Maybe we can see the sun come up. Which way is the east?"

Mr. Rebeck pointed to where the sky was the color of the bricks in the new houses. He saw a bird flying. It was the only bird in the sky, just as they were the only people walking on the street. It was far away, flying in wide, unhurried circles, contemplating the world on which its shadow fell with the arrogance that all flying things have. He thought it might be the raven, and wished that he had had a chance to say good-by, although he knew that it would have meant nothing to the raven. But men must always say good-by to things.

Aloud he said, "I wonder what happened to the seagull."

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(Continued from front flap)

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[1] *Kirkus Reviews* [2] *Book World* [3] *Chicago Tribune*

Peter S. Beagle was born in the Bronx in 1939, and now lives in Santa Cruz, California. He has just finished writing the script for the upcoming Ralph Bakshi film of *Lord of the Rings*, and is working on a new novel, as well as screenplays of *Lila the Werewolf* and *The Last Unicorn*.

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